

Bahru Zewde

The Quest for Socialist Utopia

THE ETHIOPIAN STUDENT
MOVEMENT c.1960-1974





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The Quest for Socialist Utopia

The Ethiopian
Student Movement
c. 1960–1974

BAHRU ZEWDE

*Emeritus Professor of History
Addis Ababa University*



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Dedication

*To the Youth of Ethiopia
who assumed a burden
incommensurate with their intellectual resources
and their country's political assets –
and paid dearly for it*

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Acronyms

AAU	Addis Ababa University
AFS	American Field Service
ANC	African National Congress
ANDM	Amhara National Democratic Movement
BCM	Black Consciousness Movement
CBAU	College of Business Administration Union
CISNU	Confederation of Iranian Students, National Union
EDORM	Ethiopian Democratic Officers' Revolutionary Movement
EFLE	Eritreans for Liberation in Europe
EFLNA	Eritreans for Liberation in North America
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front (<i>Jabha</i>)
ENLF	Ethiopian National Liberation Front
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Forces/Front (<i>Sha'biya</i>)
EPLO	Ethiopian People's Liberation Organization
EPRDF	Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front
EPRP	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party
EPRYL	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Youth League
ESANA	Ethiopian Students Association in North America
ESLCE	Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate Examination
ESM	Ethiopian Student Movement
ESS	Ethiopian Student Society (UK)
ESUE	Ethiopian Students Union in Europe
ESUNA	Ethiopian Students Union in North America
EUS	Ethiopian University Service
EUTA	Ethiopian University Teachers Association
EYFL	Eritrean Youth for Liberation
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
HSIU	Haile Sellasie I University
IES	Institute of Ethiopian Studies
LSE	London School of Economics
<i>Ma'ison</i>	<i>Mala Ityopya Socialist Neqnaqe</i> (Amharic acronym for AESM, All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement)
MCSU	Main Campus Students Union
NUES	National Union of Ethiopian Students

NUEUS	National Union of Ethiopian University Students
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
ONLF	Ogaden National Liberation Front
OPDO	Oromo People's Democratic Organization
PAC	Pan Africanist Congress
RESUE	Revolutionary Ethiopian Students' Union in Europe
SDS	1. Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund (Socialist German Student Union) 2. Students for a Democratic Society (USA)
SEPDF/M	South Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Front/Movement
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UCAA	University College of Addis Ababa
UCESA	University College Education Students Association
UCU	University College Union
UPESUNA	United Progressive Ethiopian Students' Union in North America
USUAA	University Students Union of Addis Ababa
WASU	West African Students' Union
WPE	Workers Party of Ethiopia
WWEWSG	World Wide Ethiopian Women Study Group
WWFES	World Wide Federation of Ethiopian Students
WWUES	World Wide Union of Ethiopian Students

Abbreviations

AR	Addis Reporter
AZ	Addis Zaman
LC	The Lion Cub
EC	Ethiopian Calendar
IESCL	Institute of Ethiopian Studies Clandestine Literature
n.d.	no date
N&V	News and Views
UCAAN	University College of Addis Ababa Newsletter
UCC	University College Calls
UCJ	The University College Journal
UCR	University College Review
UR	University Reporter

Glossary

<i>afa negus</i>	traditional title, literally meaning ‘mouthpiece of the king’, i.e. someone who delivers judgement in the name of the king
<i>dajjach</i> ,	‘commander of the gate’, a politico-military title below <i>ras</i> (contracted form of <i>dajjazmach</i>)
<i>dajjazmach</i>	see <i>dajjach</i>
<i>endarase</i>	‘in my place’, a viceroy or local representative of a higher authority
<i>gabbar</i>	tribute-paying peasant(s)
<i>gult</i>	non-hereditary right to collect tribute, bestowed on members of the nobility and clergy by the king.
<i>negus</i>	king
<i>ras</i>	‘head’, the highest traditional title after <i>negus</i>

Note on Transliteration

The transliteration of Ethiopian names and words remains a veritable nightmare. There is no universally accepted mode for it and this has bred considerable confusion. Readers who are familiar with my earlier works may recall that I tried to follow the system used by most Ethiopists and even employed diacritical marks in *Pioneers of Change*.

It has not been possible to follow that system in this book because, unlike the characters in my earlier books, most of the protagonists of the story have transliterated their own names in what has come to be regarded as the conventional Ethiopian way. Rather than exasperate my Ethiopian readers by transliterating those names using the system I adopted earlier, I have decided to retain the now-conventional rendering and, in the interests of consistency, use the same ‘system’ for other Ethiopian proper nouns as well.

Note on the Ethiopian Calendar

The Ethiopian calendar begins on 11 September (12 September in leap year) and has thirteen months, with twelve of them having thirty days each and the thirteenth month having five days (or six in leap year). It is seven years later than the Gregorian calendar until 1 January and eight years later thereafter. In this book, where dates are given in the Ethiopian calendar (EC), as in citations of Ethiopian works, the Gregorian equivalent is provided after a forward stroke (e.g. AZ, 30.9.33/7.6.41).

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I owe a debt of gratitude to many individuals and institutions – including those that I may have forgotten to mention here – for the successful completion of the project. These include those individuals who provided me with valuable documents that made the reconstruction of the history of the movement, particularly its foreign component, possible – Dessalegn Rahmato, who passed on to me quite early on his personal collection of *Challenge*; Brook and Hiruy Abdu, who generously shared with me their vast collection of ESUNA documents; Shimelis Bonsa, who supplemented this acquisition with additional ESUNA documents. On the ESUE side, I wish to thank Andargachew Assegid, who sent me a number of issues of *Tataq* and *Teglachen*, and Zeinu Shashe, who generously shared with me his rich collection of documents pertaining to ESUE, WWFES and the student unions in the Middle East. Getie Gelaye, Tadelech Haile Michael and Yeraswork Admassie were kind enough to share with me their collections of photographs. Esayas Sahlu helped me in drawing the maps.

With respect to the oral data that I have been able to gather, I would like to reiterate my expression of thanks to the participants of the 2005 retreat as well as to the informants I was able to interview individually, particularly Tesfatsion Medhanie, a contemporary at HSIU in the late 1960s, who gave me valuable comments on earlier drafts of two of the chapters and with whom I held several fruitful discussions during my stay in Germany in 2010/11. Yilma Haile Mikael was my constant, if often sceptical, interlocutor in Berlin and my guide to the landmarks of the Ethiopian student movement in that historic city. Yonas Lemma and Susie Lemma made me feel at home in Berlin and let me and my son Kaleb spend a memorable Christmas with their families in the middle of the severest winter I have ever experienced.

Institutionally, the Department of History of Addis Ababa University and the Forum for Social Studies have served as my academic base. As so often, I would not have been able to reconstruct this history had I not benefited from the rich collection of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies Library, to which I remain eternally indebted. But, there is perhaps no institution that deserves greater credit for the completion

of this undertaking than the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (WIKO). German promotion of international academic endeavours is exemplary. Few institutions – German or non-German – would match WIKO in creating such a conducive environment for the generation and execution of research projects. The term ‘academic paradise’ evoked so often to describe the institution is far from hyperbolic. It is indeed a venue for the conduct of one’s research project unperturbed by the usual teaching and administrative burdens of academic life whilst partaking of a vibrant community of international scholars of the highest calibre. I had the privilege of joining such a community thanks to a ten-month WIKO fellowship in the academic year 2010/11. All the chapters of the book – save Chapter 2 – were drafted during that period. Indeed, I doubt if at all it would have been possible for me to write the first chapter had I not had the almost limitless library resources of WIKO at my disposal. An additional six-week grant in the summer of 2012 enabled me to refine my chapters and write the conclusion. My deepest thanks, therefore, go to WIKO – the administration as well as the staff – for making it possible for this book to appear in a much shorter period than would otherwise have been the case.

It was perhaps fitting that this book should have been written in Berlin. For West Berlin, as it was then, was the venue for so many of the significant developments in the history of the Ethiopian student movement. Owing to the centrality of its location to the ESUE constituency, it was the city where a number of its congresses, particularly in the 1970s, were held, notably the eleventh in 1971, when the ‘national question’ was debated, and the fourteenth in 1974, when the two divergent factions of the movement split irrevocably. It was also in Berlin that the EPLO (precursor of EPRP) was born in April 1972 and that the WWFES, which became the cause of (or pretext for) the split between the two factions, was founded in April 1973. That I could briefly show my family – Mesenbet, Kaleb and Tsion, as well as my brother Tesfaye – around this beautiful and historic city was a token of my gratitude to them for the patience and understanding with which they bore my long absence.

Bahru Zewde

Introduction

THE INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND

My interest in the Ethiopian student movement goes back to 1968, the year of the global student revolution. It was then, whilst I was still a third year student at Haile Sellassie I University, that I contributed an article to the *Journal of the Political Science Association*, entitled 'Some Thoughts on Student Movements: With Special Reference to Ethiopia'. I revisited that article recently, after composing most of the chapters of this book, and I was struck by the similarity of a number of the conclusions in both works. Appropriately enough, as promised in the title, the article began with a survey of the global student movement; rather ambitiously, it concluded with some bold recommendations. The article argued that the student movement was essentially 'an adolescent rebellion', underscoring the permanent tension between 'the idealism, impatience, social vision of youth and the cool and settled attitude of adults'. Class origin, it went on, had little to do with student revolt, as was particularly evident in the Latin-American case, where a number of the student activists came from upper class families. Ultimately, so the global survey concluded, students lack the power to bring about the change that they so ardently desire, thereby being forced to rely on some other organized force like the army. This proved uncannily and tragically prophetic in the Ethiopian case!

Unlike the current book, which deals with both the domestic and foreign components of the Ethiopian student movement, the article focused entirely on the domestic scene. Interestingly enough, very much like the current study, it identified the years 1961–63 as marking a watershed in the history of the movement heralding its increasing radicalization. Contributing to that radicalization, the article emphasized, were the advent of scholarship students from other African countries, the abortive coup d'état of 1960 and the abolition of the boarding system in 1962. Assuming almost iconic significance in this process of awakening was the student leader Gebeyehu Ferissa, who delivered a fiery speech 'one November evening of 1960'. Rather curiously, the article does not even mention

the 'Crocodiles', let alone draw attention to their role in the radicalization process. From the general drift of the article, it is clear that the author was wary of the perceptible growth of leftist ideology in the movement spearheaded by 'a small group of intensely active students, with the dedication and zeal born of the confidence in the absolute veracity of one's beliefs'.

Over forty years have elapsed since that article was written by someone who, in anthropological parlance, could be called a 'participant observer'. The author prefaced his article with expression of the hope that it would inspire 'a more organized and systematic research' on the subject. Some two years later, Randi Balsvik rose up to that challenge and produced what has universally been considered a monumental study of the Ethiopian student movement. I shall discuss below the merits and shortfalls of that work. I myself developed other research interests after I wrote the article. During my postgraduate studies abroad, my involvement in the movement became more active than academic. When I did turn eventually to grapple with Ethiopia's intellectual history, it was the reformist intellectuals of the early twentieth century, 'the pioneers of change', who captured my attention first. Chronologically, too, it was fitting that their story should precede that of the students. Yet, as I have indicated in the preface to my book on those pioneers, my interest in them likewise started in the late 1960s whilst going through the columns of the Amharic weekly, *Berhanena Salam*, which served effectively as the organ of those reformist intellectuals. Once *Pioneers of Change* was completed, it was only a matter of time before I could turn to tell the story of the revolutionary students. After all, pioneers presuppose followers.

STATE OF THE LITERATURE

The global student movement has generated – and continues to generate – quite a lot of literature. Quite apart from the specific country studies and the reminiscences of protagonists (highlighted in Chapter 1), there were quite a few books – mostly edited rather than single-author – that appeared contemporaneously with the momentous events of the 1960s and 1970s. US scholars were particularly active in these studies of student activism. The scope of these studies was quite broad, encompassing almost all continents except perhaps Oceania. Particularly worthy of citation are the works, in chronological order, of Seymour Martin Lipset (1967), Donald K. Emmerson (1968), Phillip G. Altbach (1970) and William J. Hanna et al. (1975). Altbach and Lipset worked in striking symbiosis, each contributing to the volume edited by the other.

Altbach's work is useful, among other things, for giving us a fairly representative definition of the term 'student movement':

We may define a student movement as an association of students inspired by an aim set forth in a specific ideological doctrine, usually, although not exclusively, political in nature . . . the members of a student movement . . . have the conviction that, as young intellectuals, they have a special historical mission to achieve that which the older generation has failed to achieve, or to correct imperfections in their environment. A student movement is a combination of emotional response and intellectual conviction. (Altbach 1970: 59)

Lipset gives us a panoramic survey of student activism in historical perspective, beginning with the role of students in the 1848 revolutions in Europe and passing through student agitation in Czarist Russia to their role as the harbingers of the 1911 nationalist revolution in China. He also highlights the role of students in regime change in South America, including the overthrow of Juan Perón in Argentina in 1955 and of Marcos Jimenez in Venezuela in 1958. He concludes, however, on a cautionary note, reminding us that ‘although students may be catalysts for political action, they can seldom bring a revolutionary movement to fruition’. He also underscores the fact that left-wing students were generally in the minority, with ‘the vast majority of students’ tending to be apolitical. Nor is student activism necessarily dependent on class status, with many of the student activists coming from upper classes whereas students from lower classes more often than not tend to concentrate on what he calls ‘careerist professional objectives’ (Altbach 1970: 29–32). More interestingly, he illustrates the intrinsic association of radicalism with youth by citing the following maxim: ‘Anyone under twenty who is not a radical does not have a heart; anyone over forty who still is one does not have a head’ (*ibid.*: 40).

Yet, few of the general works cited above have even a passing reference to the student movement in Ethiopia. The allusions in the two works that focus on Africa or the developing countries – Hanna and Emerson – are too scant or downright dismissive. Hanna, writing in 1975, refers to the movement in the context of the Nigerian student agitation that led to the first military coup in Nigeria and concludes rather tentatively: ‘It may be that repeated protests in Ethiopia and the United Arab Republic will have a similar impact upon the course of events in these countries’ (Hanna 1975: 16). Emmerson curiously equates student activism with colonial experience and concludes that ‘student activism has been almost non-existent’ in Ethiopia and Thailand, countries that both escaped colonial rule (Emmerson 1968: 407).

The task of documenting and analysing the Ethiopian student movement has thus largely been left to Ethiopians and Ethiopianists. The legacy of that movement has been so vital and its impact so profound that it continues to attract academic attention even today. The first major study on the subject was undoubtedly Randi Balsvik’s *Haile Sellassie’s Students*, even if the title strikes one as rather strange, in view of the fact that the students eventually proved to be the emperor’s nemesis. It was first written as a PhD dissertation in 1979; it was then

published by Michigan State University Press in 1985 and reprinted by Addis Ababa University Press in 2005. It chronicles with painstaking detail the growth of the movement inside Ethiopia. Its solid documentary base – including as it does above all government newspapers, student publications, official university records and 110 interviews – is hard to improve upon. It highlights the climactic significance of 1969, although to call it ‘The Revolution that Failed’ is probably stretching things a bit too far. Two major drawbacks of the book have been its neglect of the external component of the student movement and the overwhelmingly descriptive methodology the author had adopted (cf. Killion 1988: 169).

At about the same time as Balsvik was writing her dissertation, another one was being written for Stanford University by Beyene Negewo (1977). The research, which attempts to explore the ‘negative political attitudes of Ethiopian University students’, was effectively derailed as the revolutionary storm raging at the time of data-gathering rendered the research model that had been designed before the revolution unusable. Relying on questionnaire responses rather than documentary research, the result could hardly be regarded as comprehensive. Educational psychology, rather than historical analysis, is the overriding preoccupation. Or, as the author puts it, the main objective of the investigation was ‘to analyze the contextual variables within which education is related to negative political attitudes or to a *ressentiment* syndrome’ (Beyene 1977: 46; emphasis added). If Balsvik was criticized for sacrificing analysis for narrative, Beyene’s dissertation was a case in reverse, where analysis was offered without sufficient documentary base.

Two more recent theses/dissertations were those of Fentahun Tiruneh (MA 1988) and Alem Asres (PhD 1990). The former was subsequently published and will be discussed below. Although the latter’s advisor had given it a ringing endorsement for its publication and even commended it for the Egerton Dissertation prize, Alem’s dissertation remains unpublished. Where Balsvik’s study concentrated entirely on the home front, that of Asres was largely confined to a study of the US component (Ethiopian Students Association/Union in North America – ESANA/ESUNA). Beginning with a useful survey of the global literature on student politics, it goes on to examine the Ethiopian context (the social, economic and political structures as well as the educational developments within which the Ethiopian student movement had its genesis). The main subject of the study, the activities and ideological orientation of ESUNA, is dealt with in Chapters V and VI and strikes one as rather sketchy. This is perhaps not surprising, as the author seems to have used only five issues of the organization’s organ, *Challenge*, and there is hardly any evidence of oral interviews of former ESUNA activists.

Fentahun’s thesis was published in 1990 under a different title. A central theme of the book is the historical destiny of the Ethiopian

student movement to pose political opposition to the Haile Sellassie regime and the imperialist powers that sustained it. Because of this role that the movement played, he characterizes it as 'a surrogate political party organization' (Fentahun 1990: 10). In his review of the literature, he takes issue with such vehement critics of the movement as Hagos Gebre Yesus for their 'ignorance of the dialectical nature of political and organizational transformation' (*ibid.*, 24). He laments the fact that previous studies tended to treat either the home front or the foreign component, not both. As a protagonist on the home front, where he rose to prominence in 1969 when he became one of the five students tried and sentenced for sedition, one would have expected a lot more from the author. As it turns out, he was able to produce only two documents pertaining to the struggle inside Ethiopia, actually reproduced in full in the frontispiece – the report of the police weekly on the sentencing of the 'five' in 1969 and the memo from the Academic Vice-President of HSIU expelling the 'Nine Saints' in 1965.¹

What all the above works have in common is the fact that, for all three, the 1974 revolution serves as a point of reference. Balsvik's book is meant to provide a background to it. Fentahun's work goes even further and talks about articulating it. Although Asres's dissertation does not explicitly mention the revolution in the title, its concluding chapter outlines the conditions leading to the revolution. This role of the students in bringing about the revolution is something that the books that were written on the revolution itself could hardly ignore. Such was particularly the case with the works of the student and later leftist party activists, whose works appeared in the last decade of the twentieth century: in chronological order Tesfaye (1985 EC²), Kiflu (1993) and Andargachew Assegid (2000). Of the three works, the first one, burdened as it is with an ill-advised and amateurish introductory four chapters on Ethiopian history, is probably the least instructive as far as the history of the student movement is concerned. The two others are primarily concerned with the histories of their respective parties: Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) (Kiflu) and *Ma'ison* (Andargachew). But, inevitably, the earlier chapters deal with the student movement from which the two parties emerged, albeit from their respective party perspectives. Thus, Kiflu dedicates Chapter II and the first half of Chapter III to a survey of the movement in both its domestic and external manifestations. In Andargachew's case, the histories of the student movement and the party tend to merge, with the documentation for the latter clearly more solid than that for the former.

Another work that discusses the student movement as a backdrop to the 1974 revolution is that of Andargachew Tiruneh. Although marred by a couple of easily avoidable errors – such as describing *Struggle* as the organ of the Ethiopian Students Union in Europe (ESUE) and constantly

¹ See below Chapter 4: 120 and Chapter 5: 161 for details of both.

² EC – Ethiopian Calendar, throughout.

referring to the University Students Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA) as EUSUAA (Andargachew 1993: 135ff.) – it correctly identifies the major landmarks of the student movement, particularly the years 1969 (which ushered in an era of bloody confrontation with the government) and 1971 (which witnessed the split triggered by the resolutions on the national question). It also discusses at some length the process of evolution from student organizations to the rival leftist political organizations, EPRP and AESM (the English acronym, All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement, for *Ma'ison*).

Foreign works on the 1974 revolution also have some references to the student movement, albeit of a fleeting nature. Of these, perhaps the least instructive is that of Marina and David Ottaway, who locate the movement within the general framework of the 'educated elite'. Contrary to the reality on the ground, they fail 'to discern a clearly Marxist ideological line' in the student movement (Ottaway 1978: 24) and confidently assert that, its decade-long engagement notwithstanding, it failed to produce 'a full-fledged political party' (*ibid.*: 25). Clapham recognizes the embryonic political parties that emerged out of the student movement. But he asserts that their opposition was largely of a symbolic nature and that they were driven by 'a general sense of alienation from the regime' rather than any 'specific grievances' against it (Clapham 1988: 33), thus overlooking the many concrete demands and issues that students put forward in the 1960s and 1970s: 'Land to the Tiller', freedom of expression, 'education for all', the question of nationalities, rising food prices, etc. A slightly more detailed and largely accurate portrayal of the movement is to be found in Fred Halliday and Maxine Molyneux, who describe it as 'the most visible opposition' to the regime. They also recognize both the external and internal dimensions of the movement and the differences that began to emerge within the external wing in the late 1960s, culminating in the split following the 1971 ESUNA Congress on the question of nationalities. Not only do they highlight the emergence of political parties out of the movement, but they also identify the two major ones by name – *Ma'ison* and EPRP – tracing their establishment accurately to 1968 and 1972 respectively, even if they, for no apparent reason, cast doubt on the dates by describing them as 'dubious claims' (Halliday & Molyneux 1981: 77f.).

In his 1987 article, Addis Hiwet (1987: 41–64), gives a more critical assessment of the student movement than the one he had incorporated in his earlier monograph (Addis Hiwet 1975: 94–98). He prefers the term 'the Ethiopian intelligentsia', presumably to cover both the student movement and the leftist party politics that emanated from it. After a critical survey of earlier works on the role of the students as harbingers of the 1974 revolution, including some of the books cited in the preceding paragraph, he proceeds to define what he calls the structural determinants of the evolution of that intelligentsia, i.e. the growth of secular education totally divorced from the traditional or ecclesiastical one. Even if in rather ponderous language, he rightly recognizes the

hiatus between the early-twentieth-century intellectuals and their post-war descendants. Rather contradictorily, he sees the 1960 coup as both progenitor of political dissent and 'an event without a sequel' (Addis Hiwet 1987: 48)! He accurately portrays the contradiction between the narrow bureaucratic agenda of the regime in introducing the secular educational system and the subversive ideas that the students acquired from it. Even more importantly, he points to the global influences that came to bear on the students, particularly in the 1960s. He then goes on to trace the graduation of student activism to leftist politics until its denouement in 1976, underscoring its essentially urban character: 'the city that saw the rise of the left also saw its *self-inflicted decline*' (*ibid.*: 54; original emphasis).

More recently, two works have come out written by academics who were formerly student activists: Paulos Milkias (2006) and Messay Kebede (2008). Both relate the emergence and character of the student movement to the educational system introduced by the Haile Sellassie regime, emphasizing the cultural dislocation that the system induced. Paulos relies largely on his own recollections – not always accurate – to reconstruct the narrative. Inevitably, therefore, the narrative is useful in the earlier years when the author was an active participant but tends to get rather slender in the final years when he was not directly involved. He also relies rather too heavily on the responses to his questionnaire of former French Canadian Jesuit instructors and officials, leading him to the rather untenable conclusion that the replacement of the Jesuits by the Americans in the early 1960s was responsible for the radicalization of the students.

Messay's book is undoubtedly the one that has aroused the greatest interest, not to say controversy. He fails to find any positive trait in the student movement, attributing its radicalism to a cultural dislocation induced by a Eurocentric educational system and the resultant infatuation with Marxism-Leninism. He asserts with great conviction that 'the detrimental structural legacies of Halie [*sic*] Selassie's long reign do not fully explain the drift of the country into the path of radicalization and confrontation, since reformist and less oppositional solutions were available' (Messay 2008: 3). In other words, structural problems should be viewed as 'a symptom of a cultural malaise' rather than as 'the direct cause of radicalization' (*ibid.*: 5). Scathing as he is in his critique of the modern educational system, Messay has great appreciation for the 'Ethiocentric' traditional one, finding it to be 'highly integrative and nationalistic' (*ibid.*: 52). Even if it had some shortcomings, it should have been reformed following the Japanese and Indian models rather than completely discarded in favour of the modern system.

Messay's novel interpretation of student radicalism has provoked a number of critical reviews: Gebru (2009), Iyob (2010) and Reid (2008). This author also feels uncomfortable about the bold assertions that he makes without sufficient documentation. The contrast between Balsvik and Messay is quite striking. Balsvik is sympathetic to the students

while Messay is dismissive. The former is descriptive while the latter is more analytical. More importantly, Balsvik's work has a solid documentary base, while that of Messay is largely based on secondary sources and a selective reading of the publications of the students he hastens to condemn so unequivocally. The tragic consequences for Ethiopia of the student movement are there for all to see. But, that should not lead one to regard them as an aberration without any socio-economic basis.

There are in my opinion three fundamental problems with Messay's evaluation of the student movement. The first is his underestimation of the structural causes that led to its rise. Here, what is important is not the class origin of the student radicals, for it is true that, as Messay himself argues, many of the radicals actually came from affluent families and, as shown above, Ethiopia was not unique in this regard. More important are the major structural problems of the Haile Sellassie regime, notably its autocratic character and the absence of any meaningful land reform. It is not without reason that the slogan of 'Land to the Tiller' had such a resonance from the moment it was first articulated. It was to become the main driving force behind the 1974 revolution. Irrespective of the wisdom or otherwise of the resolutions adopted in the 1971 ESUE and ESUNA Congresses, there is also no doubt, either, that the students tried to address a fundamental problem when they grappled with the national question. One searches in vain throughout Messay's book for any substantial critique of a system that could not even tolerate the idea of a constitutional monarchy, let alone introduce any meaningful land reform or tolerate regional autonomy.

The second major problem with Messay's analysis is his conviction that the traditional church education could have provided the basis for Ethiopia's modernization. Given its obvious limitations, of which Messay himself seems not to be unaware, it is difficult to imagine how it could have had the potential to transform the country. If indeed he had such faith in its transformative potential, it would have been incumbent on him to indicate the ways it would have been reformed. As it stands, apart from its non-scientific character, the traditional church-based educational system excludes a significant proportion of the Ethiopian population that does not adhere to the Orthodox Christian faith. To pose even as a challenge 'how the two religious communities and the various ethnic groups can evolve national characteristics through the inheritance of the cultural and historical legacies of traditional Ethiopia' (Messay 2008: 6) is tantamount to prescribing a policy of assimilation. The invocation of the *Kebrä Nagast*, the medieval Ethiopian account of the union of King Solomon and Queen Sheba, as a national epic also elevates a document that had the historical role of legitimizing a dynasty to the status of a national charter.

Third, Messay seems to believe that radicalism or infatuation with Marxism-Leninism was a unique malady of Ethiopian students. But, as the discussion in Chapter 1 will make abundantly clear, both

tradition and the dream, as it turned out to be, of constructing a new world untainted by the ills and imperfections of the past were not a monopoly of the Ethiopian youth. Whatever the failings of the global student movement, it would be difficult to dismiss all the issues they raised as youthful escapades that can be explained away by psycho-historical analysis, and not all the problems raised at the time could be said to have gone away. Vietnam may be a matter of the past, but Iraq is still with us, living testimony to the arrogance of power. Communism may be dead, but capitalism is still plagued with periodic crises – evidence, if any were needed, that it is not the perfect system its advocates claim it to be. Leninism may be *démodé*. But Marxism as an analytical tool continues to have relevance. Many student activists who participated in the movements of the 1960s and 1970s owe to them some of the enduring features of their personalities, such as gender sensitivity, multiculturalism and viewing authority with a salutary dose of irreverence.

In short, the student movement, the Ethiopian included, has to be viewed not as a philosophical issue but as a historical phenomenon. As such, it has to be understood within the context of its time, not judged from the vantage point of the present. In the immortal words of the great German historian Ranke, it has to be recorded first and foremost ‘the way it exactly happened’, and not how it should have been. As such, any evaluation of the movement has to be based as far as possible on an exhaustive investigation of the available evidence, oral as well as documentary. Such an investigation has a better chance of presenting a more nuanced picture rather than one of celebration or castigation. Such an approach has a better chance of appreciating the fundamental validity, for instance, of the two paramount issues raised by the Ethiopian student movement – the agrarian and the national question – while taking exception to the solutions prescribed.

Such is the objective of the present study, to build on the solid empirical work of Balsvik and to present a more comprehensive and analytical narrative, placing the movement within first its global and then its national contexts. Taking into account both the external and internal components of the Ethiopian student movement, the study is based on a careful investigation of all the available records, particularly the student publications – from the early newsletters of the University College of Addis Ababa to the later available issues of ESUNA’s *Challenge* and *Combat* and ESUE’s *Tataq* and *Teglachen*. Included are data gathered from a workshop or retreat held in 2005; an English synopsis of the proceedings of that unique experience has already been published (Bahru 2010).

This study is primarily based on as exhaustive as possible consultation of student publications as well as unpublished reports and leaflets, generated both inside and outside the country. These are supplemented by relevant documents of Haile Sellassie I University as well as government police and security reports. In addition, government newspapers,

particularly the Amharic daily *Addis Zaman*, have been used extensively to get the government perspective, quite apart from their utility as a chronological benchmark. The written data has been supplemented by a massive corpus of oral data gathered largely through the fairly unique mode of collective reminiscing by some two dozen former student activists during the retreat I organized over a four-day period in September 2005. It was a challenge and a privilege to which the participants responded with singular enthusiasm – a challenge because the issues that inspired and agitated the student movement are far from dead yet; a privilege because not so many of our colleagues have been able to survive to tell their story.

The organization of the retreat posed considerable methodological challenges in itself. The first was the issue of how detached the participants could be in recollecting events and activities they had experienced and pursued with singular passion. In other words, has the acrimony that characterized the Ethiopian student movement, particularly in its later years, died down sufficiently to enable sober reflection? It was with a view to averting the continuation of that acrimony that I circulated some guidelines as to how to conduct ourselves in the course of the reminiscing exercise, enjoining participants to narrate rather than analyse, ‘not so much to vindicate with the old kind of single-mindedness one’s point of view as to be able to see the other side; indeed, to go even further and be able to laugh at oneself!’ (Bahru 2010: 161–2). As it turned out, although some participants found the strict guidelines somewhat irksome at the outset, almost all adhered to it faithfully, thereby ensuring the success of the undertaking.

Another methodological issue was the relative merits and demerits of collective reminiscing as opposed to individual interviews. This is an issue that has preoccupied all practitioners of oral historiography for decades, particularly in Africa. The collective mode has the merit of on-the-spot cross-checking of evidence while it has the drawback of intimidating the less outspoken participants. On the other hand, the individual mode has the advantage of allowing the informant to open up while it necessitates subsequent comparison of testimonies by the researcher. Ultimately, of course, the two modes should be complementary rather than mutually exclusive, and this is what I tried to do in this case. The collective reflection, which came up to eighteen ninety-minute cassettes, was preceded and followed by individual interviews of activists who were not able to attend the retreat (cf. *ibid.*, 6–7). Indeed, one such activist subsequently gave me what he strongly felt was a much-needed corrective to the rendering of the events in which he had been intimately involved.

Just as the retreat was an exercise in collective self-reflection, the story narrated here is semi-autobiographical. This author was part of the student movement in those heady days – as a relatively detached participant/observer in the 1960s and as a more engaged participant in the 1970s. But, although I have relied occasionally on my own personal

recollections, I have tried as much as possible to be guided in my analysis and judgement by the primary documents that I have been able to consult. I leave it to the reader to determine how much I have been able to attain the necessary level of detachment.

In a sense, therefore, this book can be seen as an attempt to complete the task that I had begun over forty years ago. The first two chapters deal with the global and national contexts that are so crucial to the understanding of the genesis and trajectory of the student movement. Chapter 3 narrates the innocuous beginnings of that movement, when students were much keener on nurturing the intellect and cultivating the personality than in raising thorny political issues. Chapter 4 documents the fairly long process of its radicalization, including the four-year-long (1965–68) sustained confrontation with the imperial regime. This confrontation attained its peak in 1969, the subject of Chapter 5, culminating in the bloody showdown of December 1969 ignited by the assassination of the USUAA student leader. Chapter 6 discusses in detail arguably the most contentious issue raised by the movement, i.e. the ‘national question’, while Chapter 7 traces the process of organizational fusion and fission that it underwent. Finally, in Chapter 8, the salient points of the study are recapitulated and an attempt is made to sum up the contentious legacy of the movement to the contemporary Ethiopian political scene.

Lurking in the background of this narrative is of course the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974. I am aware that some readers might feel a sense of disappointment that the story has not been extended to cover the transformations that the country underwent in the wake of that event, but that is a story that requires a volume (or even volumes) by itself. I have alluded above to works that have already tried to describe and analyse it. I have myself offered a somewhat synoptic account of those years in the second edition of my book, *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855–1991*. More recently, Messay Kebede has come out with a sustained and multi-faceted analysis of the Ethiopian Revolution (Messay 2011). Nor did the revolutionary process end with the eruption of and the sequel to the 1974 Revolution. For Ethiopia experienced what amounted to a second revolution in 1991 with the overthrow of the Darg and the conquest of state power by the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front. For all these reasons, my account has to end in 1974, just as my story of the *Pioneers of Change* had to stop in 1941. By way of concession, however, I have tried to delineate in the concluding chapter some of the enduring legacies of the student movement. These conclusions will hopefully help readers appreciate both the achievements and the limitations of the student movement, with a view to attaining the social justice and equitable development that has been the goal – alas, yet to be attained – of generations of Ethiopians.

Youth in Revolt

*Anyone under twenty who is not a radical does not have a heart;
anyone over forty who still is one does not have a head.¹*

GLOBAL CONTEXT

As these lines were being penned in 2011–12, the world was gripped by the series of popular challenges to authoritarian rule that has come to be known as the Arab Spring. The revolution that spread across the Arab world like a conflagration was set ablaze by the dramatic act of a Tunisian street vendor by the name of Mohammed Bouazzi, who set himself on fire after security forces overturned his vegetable cart, thereby depriving him of the right to earn his livelihood. The popular revolution that swept across the country did not stop until it got rid of the dictatorial and venal rule of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. The success of the Tunisian revolution ignited a series of popular revolts in Yemen, Egypt, Libya and Syria. After varying degrees of resistance and differing degrees of ferocity, almost all of the dictatorial regimes crumbled. Hosni Mubarak of Egypt resigned and was forced to face charges of causing the death of so many protesters. Muammar Ghadafi of Libya was finally hunted down, caught hiding in a gutter and summarily executed. Both rulers had pushed authoritarian rule to its most absurd limit by toying with the idea of dynastic succession. The wildest of them all, Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen, made a safe exit after many twists and turns, including surviving an assassination attempt. These last three had each been in power for thirty years or more.

Partly inspired by the Arab Spring, protest movements erupted in a number of Western cities in 2011. They came to be known as the ‘Occupy Movement’, taking their name after the first and most famous of them all, the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ movement, which had its locus at the Zuccotti Park in New York City. But the early murmurs of the movement were seen in Spain in mid-May by the protests of what came to be known as the ‘Indignants Movement’, which, in reaction to the

¹ Altbach 1970: 40.

Eurozone crisis that was attended by one of the highest unemployment rates in Europe, called for a fundamental restructuring of the Spanish political system. The Occupy Movement, which was particularly widespread in the United States, called for an end to the social and economic inequities of the capitalist system, targeting in particular what it called 'corporate greed'. Hence the telling motto of the movement: 'We are the 99%'.

While the youth were not particularly conspicuous in the 'Occupy Movement', there is no doubt that they played a preponderant role in the Arab Spring. As the group most affected by the high rate of unemployment in the Arab world, they had nothing to lose from the end of the prevalent system and everything to gain. Above all, their adept use of social media injected a new dynamism and resilience into social protests. Equally significant is the fact that, although they ignited and brought the Arab Spring to fruition, it was the more established political groups, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, who eventually reaped the fruits of revolution.

Where the role of youth was even more indisputable was in the series of demonstrations that took place in French cities a few months before the Arab Spring. These demonstrations were directed against the Sarkozy government's introduction of a bill increasing the retirement age. While the protests naturally began with the workers and civil servants most directly affected by the new legislation, it was not long before the students came into the forefront, evoking memories of 1968, when students shook the De Gaulle regime to its foundations. By late October 2010, the battle line had clearly been drawn: it was between the students and the government security forces. Evidently, nothing could be more removed from the immediate concern of students than worries about their retirement plans. What moved them to protest can only be attributed to either of two things: solidarity with the affected sectors of French society or bringing down – or at least embarrassing – the hated Sarkozy government.

Midway between these student protests in France and the global student protests of 1968 was the phenomenon of Tiananmen Square, described by someone who studied it closely as 'perhaps the largest student movement in history' (Zhao 2001: xv). Simmering resentment of the Chinese authoritarian regime came to the boil in April 1989 following the death of the Secretary-General of the Chinese Communist Party, Hu Yaobang, who had been disgraced because of his 'soft attitude' towards the student protests of 1986. What began as a ceremony of laying wreaths and composing elegies in his honour turned into a hundred thousand-strong student march on Tiananmen Square in reaction to a *People's Daily* editorial accusing students of conspiracy. On 22 April, in a dramatic evocation of tradition, three students knelt for three hours on the steps of the Great Hall of the People with a petition to Premier Li Peng. The premier's flouting of tradition by refusing to receive the petition was a clear foreboding

of what was to come. The students responded with a hunger strike that provoked a solidarity march of over one million Beijing residents on 17 May. Two days later the government declared martial law. On 3 June, the brutal suppression that captured world headlines began (*ibid.*: xxv–xxvi).

What the two events described above (China in 1989 and France in 2010) demonstrate is the continuing relevance of student activism. The 1968 student protests were phenomenal in their breadth and depth. But they were certainly not the last such protests; nor were they the first. Students were in the forefront of the revolutions that swept across Europe in 1848. More enduringly, they formed an important element in the constellation of forces that brought about the 1905 and 1917 revolutions in Russia. Starting with the ‘back to the people’ movement of the 1870s, regular student protests coalesced into a broad mass movement particularly after 1899. It was also from that student movement, the *studentchestvo*, that many of the radical revolutionaries who were to lead the Russian revolutions emerged (Morrissey 1998: 4). The year 1905 formed a watershed in the student movement, as the politicians increasingly relegated the students to the backseat. After 1917, the student movement effectively disappeared (*ibid.*: 228, 234).

In China, the student movement was a sequel rather than a prelude to the 1911 Revolution led by Sun Yat-sen, which was directed against foreign oppression and domestic ineptitude. The students gained particular prominence through what has come down in history as the ‘May 4 Movement’ (sometimes also known as the ‘New Thought Movement’), precipitated by the feeling of betrayal that prevailed in China after the end of the First World War, when hopes of regaining Japan-controlled Shantung (Shandong) as a reward for aiding the Allied war effort were dashed by the Treaty of Versailles. The students staged a massive demonstration at Tiananmen Square on 4 May 1919 (hence the name of the movement) in protest against the government’s spineless reaction to the terms of the treaty, sparking off a series of demonstrations and strikes throughout the country. It is of interest that one of the highlights of the 1989 student protests in China was a commemoration of the May 4 Movement (which took place exactly 70 years earlier) with a march on that date.

The May 4 Movement marked a radicalization of society and the party set up by Sun Yat-sen, the Kuomintang, and the formation of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921. Ultimately, though, the students fared not so well with either the Kuomintang or the Communists, being violently repressed by the former and shunted off to the margins by the latter. Many student radicals were liquidated in the wake of Chiang Kai-shek’s bloody purge of the Communists in 1927 as the Kuomintang-Communist alliance unravelled. Mao relied more on the rural peasant masses than the urban intellectuals to secure his final victory (Israel 1970: 179–99). Only in the 1960s did Mao find

use for the youth, when he unleashed the Cultural Revolution on the country to consolidate his power.

In Indonesia in the 1960s, students played a rather uncharacteristic role by conniving in the bloody suppression of the communists and the ushering of General Suharto's military dictatorship. The Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) had grown into a powerful force in partnership with President Sukarno, the first president of independent Indonesia (1945–67). With a membership of around three million, it was considered the largest communist party outside the Soviet Union and China. But the assassination of six generals on 30 September 1965 was viewed as a coup attempt by the party. The anti-Communist backlash that followed was to culminate in the banning of the party and the mass killing of hundreds of thousands of its members. Interestingly enough, students, organized into the Indonesian Students' Action Front (KAMI), a new federation purged of Communists and communist-oriented organizations, played a prominent role in the chain of events that led to the massacre. The alliance of KAMI and the military leadership led to the promulgation of a decree by Sukarno on 11 March 1966, handing over extensive powers to General Suharto, his ultimate successor. This was followed by the ban and liquidation of the Communist Party (Douglas and Bachtar 1970: 156–65). In subsequent years, the fate of PKI was constantly evoked by communist and leftist groups as a grim lesson in inept leadership.

It was not in Indonesia alone that students brought about change of regime. Similar student agitation led to the downfall of governments in Venezuela in 1958, Japan, South Korea and Turkey in 1960, South Vietnam in 1963, and Bolivia and Sudan in 1964 (Emmerson 1968: 390). Students were in the forefront of the protests that led to the overthrow of Perón in Argentina in 1955 as well as in the abortive Hungarian revolution of 1956 (Lipset 1970: 31). In two countries that are proximate to the Ethiopian situation by virtue of geographical location or political affinity – Egypt and Iran, respectively – student agitation assumed a more protracted character and proved far less conclusive.

The hegemonic rule that the British continued to exercise in Egypt, even after the country's formal independence in 1922, provided the rallying point for Egyptian students. A nationalist ethos, encapsulated by the motto of 'Egypt for the Egyptians', pervaded the movement, which was inaugurated with a series of demonstrations in late 1935. This massive student protest contributed to the conclusion of the Anglo-Egyptian treaty of 1936, by which the British agreed to withdraw all troops from the country except from the Suez Canal. Ten years later, in 1946, the British and the Egyptian government faced a veritable student uprising demanding the total withdrawal of British troops from Egyptian soil. This was to lead eventually to the abrogation of the 1936 treaty by the Egyptian Prime Minister, Nahas Pasha, on 8 October 1951 (Abdalla 1985: 40–42, 64, 78). But the final liberation of the Suez Canal

The students were an important influence behind the Egyptian revolution of 1952, which brought Nasser and his colleagues (the Free Officers) to power. As Abdalla argues, the Free Officers were

... directly influenced by the student movement. Many of them had come to political awareness as secondary school students. There were indirect links between officers and students through the extra-parliamentary organizations, while some officers were themselves external students at the university. Their political programme had much in common with those of the student movement. (*ibid.*: 79)

Inevitably, however, the honeymoon between the students and the officers did not last long. Opposition to the new regime first came from Alexandria University, which had also been the first to come out in support of the Free Officers. Students demanded the disbanding of the Revolutionary Command Council, as the ruling body was known. Nasser reacted by ordering the arrest of a number of the lecturers, presumably taking them to be the chief instigators. Side by side with bloody suppression of student unrest, the regime set up its own youth wing, the Socialist Youth Organization, leaving the students with either of two options: alignment or withdrawal. Many turned to the 'opium' of football. The few who remained committed were affiliated either to the Muslim Brotherhood or the Marxists (*ibid.*: 119-27).

It required yet another foreign pressure to galvanize the students into a new round of activism. This came about in the late 1960s and 1970s, and it was Israel rather than Britain that now came to preoccupy the students. The shock of the Egyptian rout in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, and particularly the responsibility of the Egyptian Air Force for that debacle, became a rallying point for student opposition. In the early 1970s, students of Cairo and Ain Shams Universities expressed their discontent at the procrastination of Anwar Sadat, Nasser's successor, in executing his pledge to liberate Sinai from the Israeli occupying force, with a series of sit-ins and a 'crescendo of wall-magazines' (*ibid.*: 198). At a hearing of the parliamentary commission set up to investigate the disturbances, a particularly indulgent MP made this interesting observation:

The student movement is a universal one, and in Europe, England, Japan and everywhere else they have more of it than we do. It is an ordinary matter and there would be nothing wrong with it even if a student were to ask us to prove the existence of Allah. We would just have to prove it. (*ibid.*: 205)

Abdalla's concluding assessment of the Egyptian student movement highlights both its faults and merits. While he points out 'the superficiality with which it discussed the country's problems . . . , the virtual absence of democratic traditions of discussion and debate', he nonetheless credits it for being, particularly in the years 1967-73, 'an element of pressure on the ruling power to restore the country's self-esteem through the recovery of lost territories' (*ibid.*: 218). He also argues that

it contributed to the gradual democratization of the political system, particularly after the 1973 (Yom Kippur) War.

In Iran, the ascendancy of the ayatollahs in the course of the 1979 revolution has tended to obscure the prominent role that Iranian students had played in bringing about the downfall of the Shah (cf. Ghamari-Tabrizi 1998: 232). Yet, a detailed study of the organization that spearheaded the Iranian student movement, the Confederation of Iranian Students, National Union (CISNU), characterizes it as 'the largest and most effective opposition organization during the 1960s and 1970s' and concludes:

The Confederation played the most important role in portraying the shah's regime as a repressive dictatorship, thereby undermining its international legitimacy and support. Through vocal demonstrations and publicity campaigns, it was instrumental in drawing the attention of the international media, human rights organizations, political groups, and foreign governments to repression in Iran. (Matin-asgari 2002: 1)

Indeed, for those in the Ethiopian student movement very familiar with the organizational strength and Marxist orientation of the Confederation, the decidedly Islamic character of the 1979 revolution came as a big surprise. Part of the explanation probably lies in the predominantly foreign base of the Iranian student movement. The domestic scene was dominated by the Islamic seminarians (*tollab*) loyal to Ayatollah Khomeini, with the city of Qom, a Shi'ite stronghold, serving as their base (*ibid.*: 11).

The fall of the highly popular and nationalist Mossadeq regime in 1953 through a CIA-engineered coup was a defining moment in modern Iranian history. It was followed by the suppression of the Iranian Communist Party (Tudeh) and the exodus of its adherents as well as supporters of the National Front of Mossadeq. It was from these exiled elements that the radical student opposition to the Shah abroad came to be constituted. Thus, in 1960, the Confederation of Iranian Students (CIS) was established in Europe and, in North America, the thitherto pro-government Iranian Students' Association in the United States was taken over by the radical opposition. Two years later, the two organizations merged in Paris to form CISNU. Students inside Iran were organized under the umbrella of the Organization of Tehran University Students. As peaceful and legal opposition to the regime became almost impossible, particularly after the bloody suppression of 1963, the ranks of the external opposition swelled. In the early 1970s, the membership of CISNU was estimated to be in the region of fifty to sixty thousands (*ibid.*: 164).

One of the high points of CISNU activism was the demonstrations that it inspired during the Shah's visit to Germany in 1967. The demonstrations, which were organized by the German SDS (Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund/Socialist German Student Union), led to the death of one German student. It was in the course of these

demonstrations that the German student movement got both its martyr, Benno Ohnesorg, and its leader, Rudi Dutschke. The US contingent of CISNU was equally active in anti-Vietnam war demonstrations. In 1976, CISNU attracted considerable media attention by exposing captured classified documents on the international operations of the dreaded Iranian security apparatus, SAVAK. In 1978, the Shah was greeted with yet another violent demonstration when he made an official visit to the United States (*ibid.*: 12–13).

The developments described above in the history of the Egyptian and Iranian student movements were to have points of both convergence and divergence with that of the Ethiopian student movement. Just as the Egyptian students were an important influence behind the 1952 revolution, Ethiopian students were to become the harbingers of the 1974 revolution. Likewise, in both countries the honeymoon between the students and the officers was short-lived. Indeed, the soldiers ended up co-opting the youth, forming the Socialist Youth Organization in Egypt and the Revolutionary Ethiopian Youth Association in Ethiopia. In Ethiopia, this was achieved after a bloody chapter in the history of the revolution known as the Red Terror. However, a major point of divergence in the experience of the two countries was that, while the Egyptian student movement remained predominantly nationalist, its Ethiopian counterpart was decidedly Marxist-Leninist.

The points of divergence were probably more marked in the case of Iran. True, students of both countries were united in their struggle against imperial autocracy, embodied by the Shahanshah in Iran and the 'King of Kings' in Ethiopia. This affinity was to be expressed in the many collaborative ventures that the foreign components of both movements undertook. Yet, while the Iranian student movement was essentially foreign-based, the tempo and character of the Ethiopian one was set by its domestic component, at any rate until 1969. Moreover, as evidenced by the CIA-engineered coup that toppled the popular Mossadeq regime and thereby triggered the militant phase of the Iranian student movement, the foreign factor was much more pronounced in the Iranian case. But, arguably the most important point of divergence between the two experiences was the fact that the Ethiopian student movement culminated in a 'socialist' revolution whereas the Iranian one was effectively side-lined by an Islamic revolution.

1968

The Iranian-German connection cited above underscores the transnational dimension of the student movement. The 1960s effectively became the decade of the students, and 1968 in particular their year. Germany was on fire in 1967; France had a veritable revolution in May 1968, followed by the United States in August and Mexico in

September. Four decades later, 1968 continues to fascinate people. Here is how a recent study of 'the global revolutions of 1968' summed up the phenomenon:

the worldwide conjunction of disorders in 1968 marked a high point in the growing sense, across nations, that an old political and social order had died. Government leaders lost the legitimacy, and even reverence, that they generally commanded a decade earlier. Inherited paternalistic and racist assumptions about cultural superiority came under siege as they had never been before. Most startling, young people around the world emerged as prominent consumers, political actors, and violent protesters on a scale unimaginable in other times. (Suri 2007: xii)

The United States both inspired and provoked that movement. John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King blazed a trail of audacity and hope, of the capabilities of youth and the inevitability of justice. Kennedy's speech of July 1960 accepting the Democratic nomination for the US presidency was a clarion call for defying the status quo and opening 'the New Frontier'. He declared that

All over the world, particularly in the newer nations, young men are coming to power – men who are not bound by the traditions of the past – men who are not blinded by the old fears and hates and rivalries – young men who can cast off the old slogans and delusions and suspicions. (*ibid.*: 29)

Three years later, Martin Luther King delivered his historic 'I have a dream speech', daring to predict a society of social justice and racial equality. In what is arguably one of the greatest speeches of all time, King challenged the American nation to 'hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope' and 'to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood'.

Yet, in the second half of the same decade, the United States that had cast such a glowing ray of hope had become the target of universal hatred as it tried to bomb its way to victory in the war in Vietnam. If there was one issue that united students and progressive forces the world over, it was Vietnam. Demonstrations in solidarity with the people of Vietnam and against US aggression became the norm, particularly in North American and European cities. The British philosopher, Bertrand Russell, lent his name and fame to the cause, setting up the Vietnam Tribunal to indict US leaders of war crimes. Among the members of the Tribunal, which was held in Stockholm and Copenhagen in 1967, were the French philosophers and partners Jean Paul Sartre and Simon de Beauvoir, the black American civil rights activists James Baldwin and Stokely Carmichael, and the Marxist historian Isaac Deutscher. Russell also set up the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, which, with the active engagement of Marxist activists like Tariq Ali, was to lead a series of demonstrations in Britain, the most famous ones being the great march on the US Embassy at Grosvenor Square in London on

20 March 1968, with contingents coming from other countries as well, followed by a second huge demonstration in October (Ali 1987: 123–7, 129, 180). The second one is reported to have attracted some 100,000 participants. As one study has concluded: ‘The Grosvenor Square demonstrations not only provide the most visible connection between student activism and Vietnam, they also provide the clearest indication of the potency of Vietnam as a force for mobilization of the student body’ (Ellis 1998: 64).

It was not only Bertrand Russell who acted as the spiritual father of the student movement. Two other prominent personalities – the German-born US philosopher Herbert Marcuse and the US linguist Noam Chomsky – both inspired and defended the movement. The German student leader Rudi Dutschke in particular drew his inspiration from Marcuse. Marcuse could be considered as the father of what came to be known as the New Left, to distinguish it from the orthodox parties and groups affiliated with either Moscow or Beijing. It came to have many adherents in both the US and Europe, inspiring and in turn being inspired by the Black Power movement in the United States, symbolized by such colourful personalities as Angela Davis and Stokely Carmichael. Things had come a long way since the pacifist messages of Martin Luther King. In between him and the Black Power movement was the fiery Malcolm X. ‘Blacks’, he confided to one of his interlocutors, ‘are a powder keg. King wants to spray the keg with water. I think we have to light the fuse. It’s the only way to teach [them] to respect us’ (Ali 1987: 42).

Also part of the New Left revolution was the anti-establishmentarian activist Abbie Hoffman, whose Youth International Party (‘Yippies’) attained international fame or notoriety through their violent disruption of the Democratic Party convention in Chicago in August 1968 (Suri 2007: 206). The New Left has immortalized itself through its organ, *New Left Review*, founded in 1960 and still active and edited successively by the British historians Perry Anderson and Robin Blackburn. Subsequently, the group also began publishing books of the same vintage under the name of New Left Books. Similar in its influence on the radical left and appearing a decade earlier was the US-based *Monthly Review*, also with a book publishing press, Monthly Review Press, which was to produce a number of studies eagerly devoured by radical students.

Inspiration of a more direct nature came from Ernesto Che Guevara. The Argentinian born global revolutionary fought side by side with Fidel Castro to bring about the Cuban revolution. Eschewing the rewards of high office, he opted to carry the flame of revolution, albeit unsuccessfully, to other lands. After an abortive attempt to stir up an uprising against the Congolese dictator, Joseph Mobutu, he shifted his focus to Bolivia, where he was eventually captured and executed. His exploits inspired a French journalist, Régis Debray, to chronicle it in his *Revolution in the Revolution?* – a book that had great inspirational

effect on radicals the world over through its celebration of guerrilla warfare, more specifically the central role that he assigned to the *foco*, the small paramilitary group that would kindle the general revolutionary insurrection. As it turned out, the very success of the Cuban revolution doomed subsequent emulations of the *foco* idea to failure, as both governments and their US patron took the necessary pre-emptive measures to nip such insurgencies in the bud. This is more or less what happened with Che's subsequent attempt to duplicate the Cuban success in Bolivia, culminating in his capture and execution in 1967 (Anderson 2010: 449). Yet, the resurgence in recent years of the Guevara cult, so neatly encapsulated in his iconic star-decorated beret, is illustration of the enduring appeal of this romantic revolutionary, a twentieth century Robin Hood or Don Quixote (Ali 1987: 134).

A cult of revolutionary violence thus pervaded the radical movement of the 1960s. The anti-colonial dimension of this violence was brought out vividly in the writings of the psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, a native of the Caribbean island of Martinique. His works got their main inspiration from the Algerian struggle for independence from French colonial rule. In his brief and tortured career (he died at the age of 31), he was to write two books – *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) – that were to have great impact. The first investigated the psychological dimension of the relationship between the colonizer and colonized, while the second celebrated the purifying effect of violence and the primacy of the African peasant in the revolutionary struggle, the latter clearly inspired by the role of the Algerian *fellaheen* in the armed struggle led by the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN).

It was within such an ideological setting that the students rose against the established order. The first major confrontation took place in Germany and was led, as mentioned above, by Rudi Dutschke and the German SDS. Dutschke was born in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR – East Germany). Feeling the stifling effect of Stalinist communism, he fled to West Berlin, where he enrolled to study sociology at the Free University. Disenchanted with both the Stalinism of the GDR and what he considered to be the sham democracy of the West, he advocated 'a long march through the institutions'. The de-nazification of Germany, or what one could alternatively call exorcising the Nazi past, permeated the German student movement. As such, it had a generational character about it, the children asking their parents and grandparents: 'What were you doing at the time?' 'How could you let it happen?' (Cohn-Bendit 2008: 74).

It is a measure of the iconic status that Dutschke achieved in German life and the profound impact that his generation has had on German society that a major street in Berlin as well as an alley at the Free University campus are named after him. Interestingly enough, the street named after him stands in an axis to the one bearing the name of the media establishment (Alex Springer) that conducted the hate

campaign against him preceding the attempt on his life in April 1968. He eventually died in 1979 from the after-effects of the shooting.

Dutschke worked closely with many Third World country students, notably, as seen above, the Iranians. Passion and dreamy utopianism was the hallmark of his speeches and writings. Perhaps more than any other of the Western student movements, the German variety has left a lasting imprint on German politics through the emergence of the Green Party as an important political force. In the words of Cornils:

The Green movement picked up where the student movement failed, arguing that goals in the private sphere of life had to be complemented by the emancipation of individuals as political beings, who would then self-confidently intervene in the public sphere of democratic decision-making. (Cornils 1998: 113)

One of the persons most closely associated with the German Green Party was 'Joschka' (Joseph Martin) Fischer. A product of the radical student movement of the 1960s and 1970s, he subsequently rose to the pinnacle of establishment politics, serving from 1998 to 2005 as foreign minister and vice-chancellor in the cabinet of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder.

While Germany probably went further than most other countries in co-opting the student radicals of the 1960s, it also produced in the Baader-Meinhof group, the decidedly anti-establishment outgrowth of the student agitation of that epoch. Named after its two leaders, Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof, it actually called itself the Red Army Faction and was committed to the overthrow of the capitalist order through armed urban attacks. These armed assaults included assassinations, bomb explosions of department stores and plane hijacks. The exploits of the Baader-Meinhof group has been the subject of an Oscar-nominated documentary, *The Baader-Meinhof Complex*, based on the critical book of the same title by Stefan Aust. Interestingly enough, the exploits of the German Red Army Faction were duplicated by groups of the same hue (both literally and figuratively) in Japan and Italy, the Japanese Red Army antedating the German one, which was followed by the Italian Red Brigades.

While these armed factions were echoes of contemporary armed uprisings ranging from the Black Panthers of the United States to the Tupamaros of Uruguay, it was also perhaps no coincidence, as Christopher Hitchens rightly points out, that all three emerged from societies burdened with a Fascist/Nazi and militarist past. Appropriately enough, the electrifying Baader-Meinhof thriller begins with a landmark event in the history of the German student movement: the visit of the Shah of Iran to Berlin in 1967. Nor is *The Baader-Meinhof Complex* the only documentary on the tortured German radical past. At the 2011 Berlin Film Festival, another documentary film *Wer wenn nicht wir (If Not Us, Who?)* traced the pre-history of the German student movement, combining radical opposition to the Nazi-tainted political order with uninhibited indulgence in drugs and free love.

The counterculture that grew out of the student movement, encompassing the whole gamut of expression from art and literature to the popular dailies and the ecological movement that was the genesis of the Green Party, has been explored in detail by Sabine von Dirke (1997). The author sums up the central place that the German student movement has continued to occupy in the public sphere in the following terms:

Whether it is nostalgically hailed or angrily denounced, nobody can dispute the strong and enduring impact of the student movement on politics and culture in postwar West Germany. It broke with the Adenauer era's culture of conformity and instead developed a culture appreciative of criticism and protest from which the first citizens' initiatives could rise in the 1970s and grow into strong new social movements. In short, the student movement represented a politics of fundamental opposition interested, not in the redistribution of political power within the parameters of the established system, but in reshaping social consciousness for a lasting political and cultural revolution. It is therefore not surprising that the student movement has gained commemorative status in the Federal Republic. (von Dirke 1997: 31)

Joschka Fischer, the chastened rebel, was closely associated with another of the student radicals of the 1960s, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who himself was to end up as a member of the European Parliament. A sociology student at the University of Nanterre, in the western outskirts of Paris, he led the student protest movement that was to rock French society to its foundations and leave such a lasting imprint on the world as a whole. The movement could be said to have begun in November 1967 when students went on strike demanding a reform of the examination system. In January 1968, there were protests at the ban on the visits of male students to female students' residences. In March 1968, Parisian students attacked American Express in protest at the war in Vietnam (Cohn-Bendit 2008: 14). What gave the movement national resonance were deep-seated resentments against the educational system, specifically the lack of amenities to cope with the expansion in higher education and the growing irrelevance of the syllabus, as well as low workers' wages and growing unemployment (Gordon 1998: 39–40). Tariq Ali argues that the problems of higher education and the authoritarian response to the complaints were mere 'surface phenomena', asserting that if they 'had not provided the spark something else would have done. The truth was that France was ready to explode. Ten years of Gaullism had choked French society' (Ali 1987: 193).

An important feature of the French movement was its nation-wide character. Not only did secondary school students participate in large numbers, but workers came out in solidarity, staging a huge nation-wide general strike, involving eight to ten million workers or more than a third of the total work force (*ibid.*: 198). The public was also highly sympathetic to the barricading students, providing them with food, water, sugar and

pieces of cloth to make anti-tear gas masks, as well as cheering them on as they overcame the assaulting police (*ibid.*: 196). Another feature of the movement was the emergence of spontaneous organizational structures to carry on the struggle: action committees, strike committees and occupation committees (Fields 1970: 344). Moreover, the movement had a clear transnational dimension both in its genesis and its outcome. Inspired by the victorious struggles of Cuba and Vietnam, it dedicated important landmarks and buildings to these victories. Thus Latin Quarter was renamed 'Heroic Vietnam Quarter' and the main auditorium of Sorbonne University was renamed Che Guevara Hall.

Emboldened by their successes against the educational establishment and the security forces, the students broadened their protest into a showdown with the De Gaulle regime itself. At the height of the protests, De Gaulle mysteriously disappeared to the German town of Baden Baden, as it turned out to consult with the commander of the French forces in Germany. On his return he called general elections and won with a huge majority (Gordon 1998: 41). It appeared that French society, while sympathetic to the cause of the students and workers, was not yet ready to part with its charismatic war hero. But, a year later, the general took his gamble one step further and paid the price. Putting his programme of political reform to a national referendum, he lost and was forced to resign.

By contrast, although it also peaked in 1968, the student movement in Britain came nowhere to its French counterpart in challenging the regime. Partly it had to do with the generally cautious stance of the national student body, the National Union of Students, which was regarded as so pedestrian, if not downright reactionary, that some of the member unions had disaffiliated from it. Student radicalism centred above all at the London School of Economics (LSE). Indeed the LSE phenomenon has been described as atypical of British students in general, the radicalism of the students being attributed in part to the consistently reactionary character of the school administration. LSE students started hitting the headlines with demonstrations against the unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) by the minority Ian Smith regime in Rhodesia. The subsequent appointment as director of the school of a person who had been principal of the University College of Rhodesia and had stayed on after UDI added fuel to the fire, as it were. The disciplinary action that was taken against the leader of the ensuing protests led to petitions and class boycotts. During the demonstrations in October 1968, organized by the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, LSE students occupied their school to serve as sanctuary and medical care centre for demonstrators and in protest at the complicity of some of the governors of the school who were board members of companies involved in the supply of war material (Ellis 1998: 59–61).

Understandably, Vietnam provided to an even higher degree the rallying point for student protests in the United States. The protests

were led by the umbrella student organization, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). While the identical acronym with its German counterpart was purely coincidental, the two organizations nonetheless had a good deal in common. Just as the German SDS had broken away from the German Social Democratic Party, the US SDS had also been initially formed as a youth wing of 'the Old Left' but was later won over by the New Left, inspired by the writings of C. Wright Mills and Herbert Marcuse. Both organizations initially adopted strategies of non-violent civil disobedience but subsequently veered towards violence, which was to lead to their discredit and eventual disintegration (Klimke 2004: 36–41). The Berkeley campus of the University of California complex came to be the Sorbonne or LSE of the United States in the late 1960s. What turned out to be a landmark event in the history of Berkeley protests had nothing to do with Vietnam, however. It was the seizure in April 1969 of a plot of land in the campus. The plot, christened 'People's Park', was to be the scene of confrontation with state authorities as they tried to regain the plot (DeGroot 1998: 3).

But, even more than in Europe, anti-Vietnam protests in the United States continued into the 1970s. This was understandable, as US society continued to bear the effects of the continuing war more than any other. After all, it was the youth of the United States who were being drafted into the endless war. Things turned from bad to worse following the escalation of the war in Indochina with the US invasion of Cambodia in April 1970. Confrontation between students and government forces reached a high point in May 1970, when members of the Ohio National Guard opened fire on protesting students at Kent State University, killing four of them and triggering nation-wide protests and strikes.

The 1968 student revolt had its final reverberations in distant Mexico. Elsewhere, that year is remembered for the Mexico Olympic Games. If at all any discordant note was observed, it was the clenched fist Black Power salute of the two African-American 200 metres sprint medallists, Tommy Smith and John Carlos. But, in Mexico itself, the year is remembered more for the bloodiest confrontation between students and the state in the country's history. Just as the Mexican government was eager to use the Olympics to showcase its economic achievement, the students were keen to expose on the world stage Mexico's authoritarian government and the conservative social values on which it was based (Zolov 1998: 70). The result was a brutal suppression that did not spare children or innocent bystanders. Tlatelolco Square, the site where what was later declared a massacre took place on 2 October 1968, came to be inscribed in national memory. The Mexican ambassador to India, the writer Octavio Paz, resigned from his post in protest. Student leaders and activists, whether they joined guerrilla groups or entered mainstream politics, took 1968 as their point of reference.

26 The fever of the 1960s did not spare the communist world, either.

The Chinese Cultural Revolution (or the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in its official rendering) preceded the European and US ferment; indeed, because of its youthful character, the Chinese experience could be said to have had an inspirational effect on the Western one. Oblivious of its destructive character and its clear manipulation from above, its admirers in the West viewed it as a 'revolution within revolution'. Much nearer to Western Europe, in the first half of 1968, one of the satellite Eastern European states, Czechoslovakia, dared to defy the clutches of Soviet communism in a popular reform movement led by the newly elected leader, Alexander Dubček. Known as the Prague Spring, it had its antecedent in the Hungarian uprising of 1956. Although, like its Hungarian predecessor, it was crushed by the ruthless tanks of Warsaw Pact countries, it did not fail to leave its imprint on a young Soviet communist functionary at the time, Mikhail Gorbachev. The twin reform processes of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, which he launched when he reached the pinnacle of Soviet power in 1985, were belated vindication of the efforts of the 1950s and 1960s to create a more humane communist order (Suri 2007: 290ff).

THE SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN SCENE

When we turn our attention to sub-Saharan Africa, student activism was not unknown even before the 1960s. At the outset, African students were concerned more with social and cultural than with political objectives. They also tended to be organized regionally rather than country-wide, particularly in West Africa and the Maghrib. An example of this is the Fédération des Etudiants d'Afrique Noire en France (FEANF), which proved a training ground for a number of the political leaders that were to lead the struggle for independence. Students constituted an important element in the anti-colonial struggle, particularly in francophone West Africa and the Maghrib, something that was attributable to the influence exerted by the French Communist Party (Boahen 1994: 11–16).

In anglophone West Africa, the West African Students' Union (WASU), which was formed in Britain in 1925, played a leading role. In the following three decades, the union grew to become 'a training ground for future political leaders and an important anti-colonial force' (Adi 2000: 75). Led for most of this period by the Nigerian Lapidu Solanke, it opened branches in the four British colonies of West Africa: Gambia, Gold Coast (Ghana), Nigeria and Sierra Leone. Among its accomplishments were the publishing of its own journal and the opening of a hostel for West African students in London known as Africa House. Africa House was intended as a counterpoint to the Colonial Office-sponsored Aggrey House² established earlier. WASU

² Named after the Ghanaian intellectual James Aggrey, who was educated in the United States but returned to his native Gold Coast to become First Vice Principal of Achimota College.

grew through interaction with the Pan-African movement, which had made Britain its centre of activity in the 1940s, being inspired by the ideas of such Pan-African leaders as Marcus Garvey and George Padmore (*ibid.*: 76–77). The leadership of WASU also gradually passed to younger and more radical students, including a student from the Gold Coast by the name of Kwame Nkrumah, the future leader of the independent state of Ghana. It was as vice-president of WASU that Nkrumah participated in the Fifth Pan-African Congress held in Manchester in 1945.

The student explosion of 1968 was not confined to Europe and America. As we shall see below, 1969, rather than 1968, was the climactic year in Ethiopia. But, in Senegal, there was a mass outburst in May 1968, involving university and high school students as well as workers. It had many similarities with the French phenomenon. But, as the Senegalese historian Abdoulaye Bathily, himself a student leader at the time and author of a book on the protest, convincingly argues, the Senegalese event was no mere echo of its French counterpart. The French students in Dakar, who were generally more conservative than their metropolitan colleagues, far from abetting the student agitation in Dakar, asked for government protection to attend classes. Contrary to commonly held perceptions, Bathily concludes, the Dakar student uprising was ‘the logical culmination of the transformations that Senegal underwent in the first decade of its independent existence’ (Bathily 1992: 19). It was the result of a stymied decolonization process, characterized by dependence on monoculture (‘the tyranny of arachide’), industrial recession induced by the breakup of French West Africa and the crisis in the educational system. In fact, it was the government’s reduction of the scholarship allowance by a third or half at the beginning of the 1967/68 academic year that put students and government on a collision course. The final result was a series of demonstrations and strikes that rattled the Senghor regime in Senegal as much as the De Gaulle regime in France (Bathily 1992).

Perhaps the most momentous student revolt in sub-Saharan Africa ultimately occurred in South Africa with the 1976 Soweto uprising. On 16 June, pupils of Soweto went out on a massive protest march against the imposition of Afrikaans language, which had become synonymous with the odious apartheid system, as the medium of instruction in the schools. The students, dressed in their immaculate school uniforms, came out into the streets in the early morning of 16 June, with placards denouncing the imposition of the hated language: ‘To Hell with Afrikaans!’ ‘If we must do Afrikaans, Vorster³ must do Zulu’. The apartheid regime responded with a characteristic deployment of force that claimed hundreds of lives. Among the victims was the thirteen year old Hector Pieterse, who was to be the iconic symbol of the youthful defiance. The photo of his limp body carried by an older

student, with his sister Antoinette Sithole trotting alongside and crying out to the heavens, was to remain one of the most graphic images of that eventful day.

The student protests and riots were the culmination of years of agitation spearheaded by the South African Student Organization (formed in 1969) and the South African Student Movement (established in 1972). But the general tenor of the quest for black identity and dignity that the anti-Afrikaans agitation symbolized was set by the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), which had come to fill the void created by the disbanding of the African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress and the incarceration of their leaders in the 1960s. The organizational embodiment of BCM was the Black People's Convention, whose charismatic leader, Steve Biko, was detained in the wake of the 1976 riots and died under police interrogation in 1977. Although the apartheid regime managed to suppress the 1976 uprising with brutal force, disband the organizations that led it, and kill the iconic leader of the BCM, it could not recover its composure thereafter. The uprising unleashed by the pupils of Soweto could thus be seen as the beginning of the end of apartheid (Bonner & Segal 1998: 78–101; Mosegomi 2007; Hlongwane et al. 2006). In the words of Bonner and Segal:

Unlike Sharpeville, Soweto was not the end but the beginning of a period of massive confrontation between the government and the black population. 16 June would never again be an ordinary day in South Africa. Nor would life for black South Africans follow its previous course. The stage had been set for the 1980s. (1998: 101)

Elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, the hopes and aspirations of the 1960s (the decade of independence) largely gave way to the gloom of military rule. This dismal chapter of African history continued until a new wave of democracy swept across the continent in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the forefront of the opposition to military rule were students. Nigeria and Mali provide two instances of such opposition. In the former, the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) provided the leadership while Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Northern Nigeria, was the focal point. The issues raised included academic freedom, institutional autonomy and democratization in general. NANS had a manifestly anti-imperialist orientation, expressing solidarity with the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles in Africa and opposing the structural adjustment programmes imposed by the IMF and World Bank). But, this solid and united front of Nigerian students began to disintegrate in the mid-1990s under the combined pressures of the military oligarchy, the ascendancy of secret religious cults and the resurgence of ethno-regionalism (Beckman 2006; cf. Odion-Akhaine 2009).

In Mali, the first president after independence, Modibo Keita, was overthrown by General Moussa Traoré in 1968, inaugurating a period

of military rule that lasted until 1991. A coalition of political forces, including the Alliance pour la Démocratie pour Mali led by Alpha Oumar Konaré, the future president of Mali and the first Chairperson of the African Union Commission, and the Association des élèves et étudiants du Mali, began a spirited opposition which led to the overthrow of Traoré. The final act was a series of street protests in the capital, Bamako, spearheaded by the students, which reached its climax on 22 March 1991, culminating in a military coup that removed Traoré from power. About 300 people reportedly lost their lives in the protests.

SUMMING UP

A number of conclusions can be drawn about student activism from the above survey. The first is its longevity and continuity. It has been with us in one form or another from at least the 1848 revolutions in Europe. The second is its universality. It has manifested itself in almost all countries and all continents – from Mexico to China, from Germany to Mali – and in both the capitalist and the communist world, in the citadel of capitalism, the United States, and the bastion of socialism, China. While students might on rare occasions start their protests with what one may call ‘economic’ demands, as in both France and Senegal in 1968, the thrust of their protests has been political in nature, oftentimes aiming at no less than change of regime, as was indeed to be the outcome in Mali. Even in cases where ‘economic demands’ are initially at the forefront, they are soon superseded by demands of a higher order. As a comprehensive CIA report that came out in September 1968 puts it: ‘The real activists view the university as only a proximate cause, the foe close at hand. For them, the real enemy is distant from the scene. It is society organized for efficiency at the expense of the individual, a treadmill that destroys initiative and traps the unwary’ (Suri 2007: 225).

In their ideological orientation, student movements have sometimes been nationalist; but in most cases, they have been markedly leftist. Thus, the Egyptian student movement had a clearly nationalist agenda, targeting foreign (first British, then Israeli) occupation of Egyptian territory and the assault on national dignity that it represented. Within the leftist orientation, which was the predominant feature of the student movements in the 1960s, it was the New Left rather than the Orthodox Marxist-Leninist version that held sway, particularly in Europe and the United States. But there were countries within the Orthodox camp who exercised considerable influence on the student movement. China, with its ‘cultural revolution’ and history of guerrilla warfare, continued to be viewed with some fascination. Even more significantly, Cuba and Vietnam emerged as symbols of successful resistance to capitalism and imperialism. What made those two countries exercise such a strong appeal was not only the David vs. Goliath

imagery that they evoked but also their consecration of a cult of revolutionary violence. That explains the central place that the iconic figure of Che Guevara came to occupy in all the protest movements. Violence is not only tolerated but celebrated, with the tacit assumption that it is for a good cause.

Another important point is the influence that a minority of students was able to exert in galvanizing a nation-wide protest movement. Student activists or leftists were very often a minority. But they were able to identify issues that were of widespread concern and rally the majority behind them. The CIA report cited above has graphically expressed it with the formula: 'Leaders+Issues=Followers' (Suri 2007: 223). 'In every country', the report goes on, 'the militants are a small minority, but a minority able to weave a strand of vague, inchoate resentments into fulminant protest'. Police brutality very often contributes to widening the protest through what Zbigniew Brzezinski, the US National Security Advisor under President Jimmy Carter, dubbed 'expedient escalationism' (*ibid.*: 223–4). In such a process, the emotive aspects become as important as, and sometimes more important than, the rational ones. 'A student movement', one observer of the scene concluded, 'is a combination of emotional response and intellectual conviction' (Altbach 1970: 59).

The ultimate outcome of radical student movements has been generally characterized by one of the following three scenarios: revolution, repression or co-option. Revolution – albeit of radical Islamic vintage – was the final outcome in Iran; as we shall see below, it was also revolution – of secular Marxist-Leninist variety – that resulted in Ethiopia. Yet, the harbingers did not become the owners of the process. It was hijacked by the mullahs in Iran and the soldiers in Ethiopia. Repression was the order of the day in radical movements in the Communist world: Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968 and China in 1989. Co-option into the system prevailed in the Western world. The most dramatic was the case of Régis Debray, the oracle of revolutionary warfare, who ended up as advisor to President François Mitterrand. The champion of global revolution and focoism put his faith on a restructured French socialism.⁴ The Green Party in Germany also represents the collective co-option of a section of that generation and its ideas into the parliamentary process. Daniel Cohn-Bendit, leader of the French student movement in 1968, has also metamorphosed into a Green member of the European Parliament, very much like his colleague Joschka Fischer. On the other hand, there are the unrepentant Marxists who still carry on the banner of the New Left. Tariq Ali and Perry Anderson are good examples. Here is how Tariq Ali vindicates his position:

I regret nothing. Many mistakes were made by individuals (including myself) and collectives. There was a great deal about that period

⁴ For a detailed analysis of Debray's later intellectual trajectory, see Fink et al. 1996: 121ff.

which was shrouded in mysticism and fantasy. The dominant theme, however, was a passionate belief that we needed a new world. How can one possibly believe anything different today? (Ali 1987: 267–8)

Here, Tariq Ali was alluding to the reality at the time of writing: of Reaganite United States and Thatcherite Britain and the looming of Gorbachev on the horizon. That was well before the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 provoked mass civil protests throughout the Western world reminiscent of the Vietnam solidarity marches of the 1960s.

The case of the ‘People’s Park’ in Berkeley is dramatic illustration of the fact that co-option was not always the order of the day in the West. As late as 1992, nearly two and a half decades after the ‘nationalization’ of the plot, a teenage student was shot dead by the police after she raided the house of the chancellor with a view to executing him for allowing the building of volley ball courts on the park. Her death triggered rioting by some 150 supporters, showing that she was not a lone desperado but part of a movement that still battles for the contentious ground, adding to their armoury ‘a website and writs filed in California law courts’ (DeGroot 1998: 3–4).

Even more enduring and all-encompassing has been the cultural revolution that was an important aspect of the radicalism of the 1960s. The Cultural Revolution that the Red Guards sparked off in 1966 had more emotional appeal for some sections of Western society than for its place of origin, where it was largely characterized by wanton destruction. The effects of the actual cultural revolution in the West came to endure. They encompassed a host of new tastes and styles in music and costume and new attitudes towards sex and parental authority. In the words of Tariq Ali, ‘...there was a potent and heady mixture of both [pop culture and revolutionary politics]. We imbibed some of the music and the devotees of the rock groups learnt a bit of politics’ (Ali 1987: 127). Forty years after the event, the French student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit goes even further in his reflections: ‘The 60s represented above all a revolution in daily life, music, the relations between men and women, sexuality and liberation. That was what 1968 was all about’ (Cohn-Bendit 2008: 50). Ultimately, Cohn-Bendit concludes, the 1968 revolt may have lost politically but it won culturally (*ibid.*: 97).

Indeed, politically, the anti-establishmentarian exuberance of the radicals of the 1960s and 1970s provoked the conservative or neo-conservative backlash of the 1980s. This backlash, according to the linguist Noam Chomsky, was presaged by the setting up in the early 1970s of organizations like the ‘University Centers for Rational Alternatives’, dedicated to fighting the extremism of the radicals or, as they preferred to call it, the ‘new McCarthyism of the left’ (Chomsky 1971). Chomsky was convinced, however, that the student movement was ‘the one organized, significant segment of the intellectual community that has a real and active commitment to the kind of social change that our society desperately needs’. The excessive radicalism or violence

of the students was 10 per cent of the problem, while the problems that they were addressing constituted 90 per cent. 'Those who deplore the form it takes', he concluded, 'I think might do much better to ask what they can do to eliminate the evils that constitute the core of the problems we face, and then proceed to act in a serious and committed manner to confront these problems' (*ibid.*).

The Political and Cultural Context

*Those who reap the fruit from vain praise are the sycophants;
the vainly glorified are left behind with the bitter truth.¹*

The early twentieth century witnessed a vibrant intellectual discourse steered by the people described as ‘pioneers of change’ in Bahru (2002). This fascinating group of intellectuals, who happened to be the first to be exposed, directly or indirectly, to modern education, campaigned tirelessly for reform. They argued for administrative efficiency and social justice. The more advanced amongst them exposed the dependent nature of Ethiopia’s political economy. Through their prolific writings in the fields of history and language in particular, they pushed the frontiers of knowledge. This vibrant discourse reached its zenith in the 1920s, with the weekly *Berhanena Salam* emerging as their preferred forum. In Tafari Makonnen (the future Emperor Haile Sellassie), they found a natural ally as he battled with the forces of tradition to introduce political and economic reform.

The coronation of Tafari in 1930 as Haile Sellassie marked the pinnacle of this reform movement. The progressive prince had come to assume absolute power, untrammelled any more by the forces of tradition that had checkered his ascent to the throne. In the first five years of his reign, he promulgated a constitution – the first of its kind in the country’s history – that reinforced his ascendancy over the traditional nobility. He followed this up with the assertion of central government control over a number of the hitherto autonomous provinces, notably Gojjam and Jimma Abba Jifar. The subduing of *Ras* Haylu of Gojjam in 1932 was the climax of a process that had begun at the Battle of Embabo in 1882, when Shewan troops led by *Negus* Menilek vanquished the Gojjame forces led by *Negus* Tekle Haymanot. By 1935, only the rulers of Tigray and a few peripheral chieftains had managed to retain their autonomy. The foundation of a modern military organization was laid with the creation of the Imperial Bodyguard in 1930. Four years later, the first officer-training school was opened in Holata.

¹ Haddis Alemayehu, 1953 EC.

Within a year of their enlistment, the cadets that were sent to that school had their baptism of fire with the Fascist Italian invasion of Ethiopia in October 1935 and the ensuing occupation. Organized as the Black Lions, they made a short but meaningful imprint on the overall Ethiopian patriotic resistance to the occupation. But, many of them were caught in the Fascist backlash that attended the abortive attempt on the life of the Italian viceroy, Rodolfo Graziani, on 19 February 1937. The Graziani Massacre, as it has come to be known in history, was largely characterized by indiscriminate and brutal murder of all Ethiopians in sight. But it was particularly selective in rounding up and executing the Black Lions, whom the Fascists considered the intellectual driving force behind the resistance.

When, as a result of sustained patriotic resistance and British military intervention in 1940, Ethiopia was finally liberated from Fascist Italian occupation in 1941, the intellectual scene in Ethiopia was comparatively drab. The generation of the 'pioneers of change' had largely disappeared from the scene – either dead (like *Blatten Geta* Heruy Welde Sellassie), prolonging their exile and choosing a life of relative seclusion on their return (like *Hakim* Warqenah and *Bajerond* Tekle Hawaryat), or incarcerated as collaborators or *banda* (like Afawarq Gebre Yesus). Most members of the younger generation were liquidated by the Fascists in the wake of the nefarious Graziani Massacre – Benyam and Yosef Warqenah, Bashahwerad Habtawald, Belay Hayla-Ab, Kifle Nesibu, Feqade Sellassie Heruy, to mention only the more prominent ones.

Quite in contrast to the intellectual vibrancy that prevailed in the 1920s, the post-Liberation years were characterized by an assiduous cultivation of the emperor's personality cult, a process that could be said to have started soon after his coronation in 1930. Spearheading this cult was *Addis Zaman*, the Amharic weekly (as it then was).² The paper, whose name celebrated the 'new era' opened by the restoration of liberty, had been inaugurated about a month after the emperor's triumphant entry into his capital. The emperor's inaugural words not only heralded the new era but also contained strong injunctions to all to obey royal and government orders, just as a son obeys his father's orders. The editor's commentaries also had a heavy dosage of sycophancy about them (AZ, 30.9.33/7.6.41). On the celebration of the paper's sixteenth anniversary, apparently reacting to a prevalent criticism of the paper's total lack of a critical and independent spirit, the editor wrote rather defiantly that those who fault the paper on such grounds do so from the safe distance of the uninvolved (AZ, 13.8.48/21.4.56).

While it was not the only agency, the paper probably contributed more than any other in fostering assiduously the personality cult of the emperor. His birthday, the day of his coronation and liberation day were special occasions when this veneration attained its

highest pitch. The coronation was deemed to be doubly significant for it also marked what the paper dubbed the 'eternal imperial gift', the 1931 constitution (AZ, 23.2.50/2.11.57). Liberation Day marked not so much the consummation of five years of patriotic resistance against the Fascist occupation as the day when 'Ethiopians should pray in unison for a long life for the victorious emperor, to whom they owe their transition from death to life and from bondage to freedom' (AZ, 27.8.51/5/5/59). The emperor's frequent trips abroad were duly reported, sometimes in a tone of justification on the utility to the nation of such visits, no doubt directed at the sceptics and critics of such recurrent absences from the responsibilities of power (AZ, 21.3.53/30.11.60). His return from one of those trips in August 1959, after an absence of nearly two months, was marked by a show of protocol that almost matched that of his coronation anniversaries. Greeted by a twenty-one gun salute, the emperor was driven from the old airport to the Gannata Le'ul palace in a spectacular procession that featured the colourfully decked Imperial Bodyguard cavalry as well as Air Force jets circling the sky and spraying celebratory leaflets (AZ, 15.12.51/21.8/59).

The celebration of imperial success attained its climax with the Silver Jubilee of the coronation in 1955. Three months before the actual day, *Addis Zaman* heralded the event with an editorial dubbing it 'the pinnacle of holidays' (ፎክሎ በዓላት) (AZ, 21.12.47/27.8.55). In its next issue, the paper expressed its hope of witnessing the Golden Jubilee of the coronation (AZ, 28.12.47/3.9.55).³ This was followed by a series of weekly editorials building up for the big day. The occasion, marked by so many landmark events, endured in the memory of all those who lived in the period. Perhaps the most memorable was the multi-faceted exhibition featuring houses (or 'pavilions') of the different Ethiopian nationalities, a zoo, and a 'Miss Addis Ababa' beauty pageant. The Gurage Pavilion was so spectacular that the emperor paid it a second visit (AZ, 16.3.48/26.11.55). It was also at this time that the Haile Selassie I Theatre (now National Theatre) as well as the aesthetically controversial lion statue⁴ nearby was inaugurated.

What is even more remarkable is that this adulation spilled over to other members of the royal family as well. Thus, the death of his younger but favoured son, Prince Makonnen, in May 1957 was an occasion for national mourning which combined both spontaneous outpouring of emotion and official prescription of mourning protocol issued by the ministry of the imperial court. All government offices

³ That eagerly anticipated jubilee would have fallen on 3 November 1980, i.e. six years after the emperor was deposed in September 1974.

⁴ The total cost of the theatre and the lion was estimated at Eth\$1,700,000, of which the lion's portion was Eth\$100,000 (AZ, 2.3.48/13.11.55). There is what may well be an apocryphal story that the emperor, who was not quite convinced about the verisimilitude of the statue to the king of animals, is supposed to have quipped that even if it does not look like a lion, the amount of money spent on it would make it one!

remained closed and flags flew at half-mast for three days. Forty days of full mourning (including a moratorium on official receptions) and eighty days of half-mourning were declared. In addition to regulations about dressing protocol, all official correspondence was to be written on paper with a black frame. There were to be no theatre performances, no cinema shows or songs on national radio for the duration of the mourning period (AZ, 10.9.49/18.5.57). National attention thereafter veered to Prince Wessen Segged, the eldest son of the deceased prince, whose official and sometimes private functions – from his succession as commander of the Boy Scouts to his departure to Germany for study – received extensive media coverage (AZ, 1.10.51/8.6.59; 13.1.53/11.9.60).

Nor was this adulation of the emperor and his family confined to the government-controlled media and the general public. It was infused into the school system, with pupils being taught to chant songs praising the emperor and wishing him a life as long as that of Abraham and Methuselah. Ethiopian students in the United Kingdom, most of them graduates of Kotebe (or, as it was formally known, Haile Selassie I Secondary School), the first secondary school in the country, expressed their ‘devotion and gratitude to our illustrious leader’ as they celebrated his fifty-ninth birthday in Leicester. The president of the Ethiopian Students Society toasted to the health of the emperor, wishing ‘His Imperial Majesty long life and prosperous years to come, so that the Ethiopian people may enjoy fully the invigorating sunlight, which from the horizon, by the skyline of the distant Ethiopian mountains, craves to rise and make short work of the lingering dawn’ (LC, No. 2, 7.1.51). As late as December 1959, exactly a year before the abortive coup that shook the imperial throne, the University College of Addis Ababa Newsletter also reported gleefully on one of the emperor’s regular surprise visits during dinner, when he chatted with the students and brought gifts of grapes from the palace (UCAAN II, 24, 16.4.59).

Just over ten years later, a student militant by the name of Walelign Mekonnen was to write one of the most denunciatory pieces against the emperor (‘Lawaju Away’ or ‘An Edict in response to the Edict’), calling him senile and outdated. One cannot but wonder at the transformation in perception that took place in the meantime. What explains this dramatic shift in perception? How was it that a person who appeared to enjoy almost universal adulation in the 1940s and 1950s was seen as a demon by the very students whose education he sponsored? Was the unsparing opposition of the late 1960s and early 1970s a sudden outburst or was it the culmination of dissent that had been latent all along? The chapters that follow will attempt to answer this question in greater detail. The purpose of this particular chapter is to look more closely at the political and cultural context within which that opposition was born.

IMPERIAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The militant opposition of the student movement and the revolution that followed have tended to paint Emperor Haile Selassie in the darkest of colours. The radical students of the late 1960s and early 1970s had depicted him as a blood-thirsty autocrat. Yet, his reign was not all doom and gloom. In retrospect, disenchanted by the darker years that followed his demise, there are quite a few who look back to that reign with nostalgia. There is no better indication of this than the flourishing of the Ras Tafari cult, normally the preserve of the emperor's African-Caribbean admirers, even among Ethiopian youth who could know about him only indirectly. It is of interest to note here that even the emperor himself was uncomfortable with his deification by his distant admirers. In 1958, in an interview with the editor of a Jamaican paper, *Public Opinion*, the emperor was at pains to disabuse his admirers of their misperceptions. While he was ready to extend all possible assistance to them, he admonished them by saying that worshipping a human being goes against the precepts of the Holy Book (AZ, 1.12.53/7.8.61).

Ras Tafari excesses aside, even the popular biographies of the emperor that have appeared in recent years have tended to strike a distinctly celebratory tone. True, they represent an attempt to rectify the record of vilification that the emperor had suffered in the revolutionary years. Yet, there has been a clear danger of swinging to the other end of the pendulum and celebrating only the positive accomplishments of his reign. The truth, as so often in life, lies somewhere between demonization and deification. This is what I tried to underscore in an earlier article of mine: 'Hayla-Sellase: From Progressive to Reactionary' (Bahru 1994). The progressive content of the earlier part of his reign – the pre-war years and the first two decades after liberation, are beyond dispute, even if the steps that he took have to be viewed within the context of the acquisition and consolidation of power rather than as altruistic measures. In a way, the Silver Jubilee of his coronation in 1955 marks a watershed in his reign, representing the consummation of his modernization drive and heralding the years of decline. The emperor's greatest indictment in history remains his failure to arrange any meaningful transition, the elaborate provisions of the 1955 constitution notwithstanding. In other words, his political longevity became his greatest liability.

Right from the outset, before he even assumed the throne in 1930, the cornerstone of the emperor's policy was political and fiscal centralization. In this respect, the death in 1926 of *Fitawrari* Habte Giyorgis, the stalwart of the conservative establishment, could be described as the beginning of this process, as Tafari used the occasion to absorb the resource-rich provinces and the formidable military forces of the old warrior. The humbling in 1927 of yet another veteran of Adwa, *Dajjazmach* Balcha, not only removed a potentially formidable opponent but also added the coffee-rich province of Sidamo to Tafari's domain. After 1930, the process picked

momentum with the promulgation of the 1931 constitution, which more than anything else was a mechanism to consecrate the subservience of the provincial nobility to the monarchy. This was followed by the trial and imprisonment in 1932 of perhaps the most powerful provincial potentate, *Ras Kasa Haylu* of Gojjam, on charges of inordinate taxation and implication in the abortive escape of the detained ex-Emperor, Iyyasu. A year later, it was the turn of the Oromo kingdom of Jimma Abba Jifar to lose its autonomy – autonomy that had been scrupulously honoured since the times of Emperor Menilek.⁵

These tentative beginnings in political and fiscal centralization were to mature in the post-1941 era. The Fascist Italian occupation itself (1936–41) had gone a long way in eroding the powers of the hereditary nobility. On his restoration to the throne in 1941, the emperor sealed this process with perhaps the most important step that he took in his long quest for political centralization: the provincial administration decree of 1942, which made all provincial rulers answerable to the Ministry of Interior – the ministry above all ministries – even if some provinces (such as Tigray and Wallaga) still retained their hereditary rulers. Political centralization was pursued not only in its own right but also with a view to establishing central control of the country's finances. Here again, a process that was initiated before 1935 was broadened and systematized after 1941. It involved above all control of all revenue from land by eliminating intermediary tiers of revenue appropriation, or converting tribute to tax. The culmination of this process was the introduction of the agricultural income tax in 1967. Likewise, the centralization of customs administration that was initiated before the war was broadened with the introduction of the customs and export duties tax in 1943. Other government taxes, such as the education and health taxes, further augmented central government revenue.

It was this strengthened financial base of the Ethiopian state that made possible the creation of a modern military force. This process, too, had its roots in the pre-1935 years, notably with the setting up of the Imperial Bodyguard. But it was after 1941 that, with the help first of the United Kingdom and then the United States, what eventually became the largest military in sub-Saharan Africa emerged, consisting of the Army, the Air Force, the Bodyguard, the Navy, and the Police. Until 1950, the Ethiopian military structure was very much under the shadow of the so-called British Military Mission in Ethiopia, which was yet another manifestation of the British tutelage that had been imposed as a sequel to the 1940–41 British military campaign of liberating the country from Fascist Italian occupation. In this regard, of particular significance in setting up a relatively independent Ethiopian military force was the signing of the Ethio-US Treaty of 1953. That agreement set up what was known as the Military Assistance Advisory Group, the midwife of the modern Ethiopian military force,

⁵ Much of what follows is a résumé of what I have discussed at greater length in Chapter 5 of my book, *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855–1991* (2001).

initially focused on the Army, but eventually including the Air Force and the Navy.

What the United States got in return for this sustained military assistance was a communications base in Asmara. First set up by the Italians and known as Radio Marina, the Americans re-baptized it as Kagnev (after the Ethiopian contingent that fought on their side in the Korean War) and expanded and modernized the facilities. Until rendered obsolete in the 1970s by the growth of satellite communications, it served them as a major military communications base. Conversely, the conspicuous US presence that it entailed triggered militant student opposition as the base came to be seen as the bastion of US imperialism.

These processes of political/fiscal centralization and military reorganization were accompanied by an unprecedented expansion of infrastructure. Three important developments are worthy of citation in this respect. The rudimentary road network that the Italians had left behind, much of it battered in the course of the liberation campaign, was restored and further expanded through the US-funded Imperial Highway Authority, which was established in 1951. A year later the Imperial Board of Telecommunications was set up and, under Swedish management, began to offer a decent connection between and within towns. But, perhaps the most spectacular development in this sphere – one that has endured to this day – is the establishment of Ethiopian Airlines in 1945 under an agreement with the US carrier, Transcontinental and Western Air (TWA).⁶ Starting modestly with a fleet of five C-47 aircraft of World War II vintage, it had entered the jet age by 1962. In 1960, dubbed the year of African independence, it became the first African airline to inaugurate a transcontinental flight. Completely Ethiopianized by 1974, the airline's expanding domestic and international services had succeeded in bringing not only the country but also the African continent together – as the airline motto 'Bringing Africa Together' fairly accurately put it (Bahru 1988).

Even more ambitiously, the imperial regime embarked on a programme of economic development planning in the 1960s. Three five-year development plans came to see the light of day, beginning with the first in 1959 and ending with the third launched in 1969. The task of drawing and administering the plan was entrusted to what was initially called a Planning Board. This was later elevated to an independent Ministry of Planning and Development and subsequently downgraded to a Planning Commission within the prime minister's office (Tekalign 2011: 127–9). Staffed initially with foreign experts but progressively Ethiopianized,⁷ the Commission evolved into one of the most efficient units within the government.

⁶ This was the progenitor of what later became Trans World Airlines, with the same acronym TWA.

⁷ A number of these Ethiopian experts were to occupy important positions under the Darg and a couple of them even survived the Darg to serve under the post-1991 regime (Tekalign 2011: 134, 466, n. 2).

The First Five-Year Plan (1959–64) set the following objectives: the development of physical and social infrastructure, the modernization of agriculture, the raising of industrial production to meet local needs, and the mobilization of the requisite resources for economic development. The Second Five-Year Plan (1963–67) aimed at boosting agricultural production with a view to eventually effecting a structural transformation of the Ethiopian economy from an agricultural to an industrial base. The Third Five-Year Plan (1969–73, but subsequently extended to 1974), which was perhaps the most elaborately drawn of all the three plans, targeted a 6 per cent growth in gross domestic product. While industry was expected to grow by 11 per cent, great emphasis was also placed on the transformation of the agricultural sector through the development of commercial agriculture, which was perhaps the one development that had the most visible impact on the economy (Shiferaw Jammo 1995: 9–12). Indeed, the early 1970s witnessed the burgeoning of commercial farms, which boosted agricultural production and saw the emergence of an incipient agrarian bourgeoisie. Nor was peasant agriculture completely ignored. Government and foreign donors combined to develop a number of package programmes to help augment the yield from peasant farms. These included the government-sponsored Extension Project Implementation Department, the Chilalo Agricultural Development Unit (sponsored by the Swedish International Development Agency) and the Wolamo Agricultural Development Unit (sponsored by the World Bank).

The overall economic scene by the end of the period under consideration (1941–74) was one of quantitative growth which, however, was not matched by a marked improvement in the quality and standard of life. Thus, domestic output had increased three-fold, physical infrastructure had shown remarkable improvement, while public revenues and expenditures had risen nearly tenfold. Yet, the country remained at the bottom of the league of least-developed countries in Africa. Contributing to this state of backwardness was the country's antiquated system of land tenure, which reduced a significant proportion of the population, particularly in the south, to the status of tenancy (Shiferaw Jammo 1995: 53–54). The deteriorating condition of the peasantry made it highly vulnerable to the vagaries of nature such as the frequent droughts that afflicted the country. From the late 1950s on, the country – particularly its northern part – suffered a series of famines, culminating in the most devastating one of them all: the 1973 famine that ultimately triggered the 1974 revolution.

It was above all in the expansion of education that the emperor felt he had booked his place in history. His speeches abound in self-congratulatory assertions of his achievements in this regard. For long, the Ministry of Education remained under his direct charge, the highest official in the ministry being a director-general. Until well into the 1950s, he personally handed Christmas gifts to students and awarded prizes to outstanding ones. This extended into the 1960s when it came to the award of school-

leaving certificates and the 1970s with respect to that of university degrees and diplomas. Until at least 1963, the Amharic daily *Addis Zaman* habitually reported audiences that the emperor gave to students going abroad for higher studies or coming back after completing them. Successful students returning from abroad were accommodated at the Etegue Hotel (located in downtown Addis), with full board and allowance, until they were gainfully employed. This applied equally to those who returned without degrees, even if their allowance was commensurately lower. There was even an undated note, but probably written sometime in the 1950s, recommending a lessening of the gap in allowance between those returning with a degree and those without (IES CL 2395/01/3).⁸

There is no doubt that, compared with the pre-war situation, the country saw considerable expansion of educational facilities. Before the war, there were no more than two dozen schools, including missionary and community ones, all over the country and all at primary level. One of the first initiatives of the post-Liberation period was the opening of secondary schools, beginning with what emerged as the three elite schools: Kotebe (or more formally Haile Selassie I Secondary School), General Wingate, and Tafari Makonnen. The number of secondary schools had grown to thirty-seven by 1962, while that of elementary schools had risen to over one thousand by 1967. The year 1962 also saw two major changes in the school system. The first was the shift from a two-tier system (eight-year primary and four-year secondary) to a three-tier one (six-year primary, two-year junior secondary and four-year senior secondary). The second was the establishment of Amharic as the national language of instruction at the primary level (Abebe 2000: 126).

Even more significant, and particularly germane to this study, was the expansion of tertiary education in the 1950s. This began with the founding of the University College of Addis Ababa (UCAA) in 1950 and culminated in the inauguration of Haile Selassie I University (HSIU) in 1961. The inauguration of HSIU was an event of momentous national significance and attracted considerable international attention. The columns of Ras Makonnen Hall, currently serving as the main reading room of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies library, are still bedecked with congratulatory messages from sister universities. The student paper, *News and Views*, greeted the inauguration with an ebullient editorial, writing:

Ethiopia completed its educational evolution with the founding of the Haile Sellassie I University. The day will long be remembered as a milestone in our history, for on that day Ethiopia joined hands with some African countries and many other countries that have the highest institution of learning. (*N&V*, V: 13, 21.12.61)

A US national, Dr Bentley, initially served as both acting president and academic vice-president. But the Ethiopianization of the

⁸ The note went on to urge the employment of the returnees as soon as possible after their return, the establishment of a club where they could discuss national affairs, and the arrangement of provincial tours so that they would know their country better.

university took a major step forward with the appointment of *Lej Kasa Welde Maryam* as its first Ethiopian president in May 1962. The euphoria that had greeted the inauguration of the university turned into disillusionment and resentment among some of the die-hard loyalists of UCAA, as it became evident that the new university was using essentially the resources of the old college. Issues of the student paper, *News and Views*, abound with derogatory comments by former UCAA (now HSIU) students, very often using pen-names, lamenting this state of affairs. More significantly, President Kasa came to lead the university at a time of some of the most tense confrontations between students and state/university, in particular from 1965 until his replacement by Dr Aklilu Habte in 1969. In retrospect, however, most participants of those dramatic years, including some of his radical critics, acknowledge the tact and competence with which he handled a volatile situation.

The university brought under its wings not only UCAA but also the other colleges that were established subsequently: Imperial College of Engineering (1952), the Building College (1954), Public Health College (1954), the Imperial College of Agriculture and Mechanical Arts (1956) and the Theological College (1960) (Abebe 2000: 125). UCAA started with seventy-five students and was at the outset essentially a liberal arts college; there were no science graduates until 1957. At the outset, even the liberal arts courses offered were decidedly foreign, only two courses being offered on Ethiopia in 1953, one of them 'a special course on Port Administration', initiated in October 1951 in anticipation of the federation of Eritrea (along with its Red Sea ports) with Ethiopia. By 1960, though, the number of courses dealing with Ethiopia had risen to twenty-nine. Likewise, the first Ethiopian instructor was appointed only in 1955, although the number of Ethiopian staff continued to grow thereafter, until it reached eleven out of a total of sixty by 1960 (Aklilu 1961: 26–31).

By 1973, the total enrolment of students at all three levels (primary, secondary and tertiary) had reached the figure of 1,057,227, of which government educational establishments accounted for 820,436 (Abebe 2000: 127). While this represented a significant increase over the earlier decades, it still fell far short of satisfying national needs. For example, the government budgetary allocation for education in the 1960s averaged 11.4 per cent, compared to 27.5 per cent in Nigeria and 29.45 in Uganda (Balsvik 1985: 9). The system was further plagued by lack of equity, with the enrolment disproportionately tilted towards male rather than female students, urban as opposed to rural areas, and regions like Addis Ababa, Shawa and Eritrea. Attrition was another serious problem both at the secondary and tertiary levels. The overtly academic bias of the curriculum meant that the school-leaving examination (ESLCE) was the only gateway to a future career. Yet, the ESLCE failure rate rose progressively from 11 per cent in 1951 to nearly 84 per cent by 1969 (*ibid.*: 8). Given this state of affairs, one can well

understand the high degree of agitation that came to prevail among high school students after 1969, as they could only see a bleak future awaiting them. Indeed, the nation-wide demonstrations of that year, which tested the regime as it had never been tested before, revolved around the question of equity in education.

Contributions to the December 1968 issue of *Challenge*, the organ of the Ethiopian Students Union in North America (ESUNA), also pointed out other inadequacies of the educational system. Andreas Eshete chastised the system as being elitist, individualistic and completely divorced from the community, while Dessalegn Rahmato pointed out its bias towards the social sciences and the humanities and its essentially co-optive nature (*Challenge*, IX: 1, December 1968). Somewhat belatedly, the government tried to redress the overly academic bias of the educational system. In October 1971, with prodding from the World Bank, it launched what came to be known as the Ethiopian Education Sector Review (EESR). Fourteen task forces and four small working groups drawn from both international and national education experts embarked on what, had it been implemented, would have amounted to a total overhaul of the country's educational system. After months of deliberation, the EESR directorate presented three variations on a new educational system to a national conference in July 1972. The conference adopted what was described as a 4-4-4 system, providing for four years of what was called the minimum formation education, four years of junior secondary education and a four-year senior secondary education programme.

The directorate submitted a summary of its final report to the Ministry of Education in August 1972. Approved by the Council of Ministers and the emperor in April 1973, the programme started to be implemented the following September. The formal announcement of the final report in February 1974 could not have come at a worse possible time. By then, the country was in the midst of the ferment that presaged the 1974 revolution. The teachers' association rejected the review as a veiled attempt to perpetuate the prevalent class divisions by denying children of the poor access to secondary and tertiary education. The strike that it called in protest was one of the catalysts that ignited the February 1974 popular uprising (Abebe 2000: 139–45).

Thus, what had started as a process of creating and buttressing the bureaucratic props of absolute power had ultimately turned against that very same power. It is erroneous to view Haile Sellassie's policy of the expansion of modern education as either an altruistic enterprise borne out of love for country and people, as his admirers proclaim, or as a deliberate assault on tradition emanating from acceptance of the colonial thesis on the essential backwardness of non-Western societies, as Messay asserts (2008: 62). Rather, as Abebe Fisseha rightly argues, the introduction of modern (i.e. Western) education was an important facet of the emperor's policy of the centralization of political power and the creation of a pan-Ethiopian identity (Abebe 2000: 234). It worked, up to

a point. The Ethiopian state was able to produce a cadre of civil servants who served with diligence and competence in the various ministries. Albeit at the cost of cultural assimilation, a sense of pan-Ethiopian identity also emerged, fostered above all by the school and the military, and this sense of identity has endured despite the battering it had suffered under the ethno-nationalist onslaught of recent decades. With the passage of time and the lack of any meaningful political and social reform, discontent grew, first tentatively then more stridently. Likewise, the policy of cultural assimilation bred resentment that fed into the ethno-nationalist consciousness of the 1960s and 1970s and ultimately led to a period of armed struggle that eventually came to define the political configuration of contemporary Ethiopia.

THE CULTURAL SCENE

The 'pioneers of change' enriched the life of pre-war Ethiopia not only through their passionate advocacy of reform but also through their historical, linguistic, and literary works. Thus, many of them (Afawarq Gebre Yesus, Atsme Giyorgis, Gebre Heywat Baykadagn, Heruy Welde Sellassie, Tamrat Ammanuel, and Tayya Gebre Maryam) had a work or two to their name on Ethiopian history, Heruy being the most prolific of them all. Afawarq, Gebru Desta and Tayya were also grammarians. In the sphere of literature, Afawarq wrote what has universally come to be recognized as the first Amharic novel, *Leb Wallad* (or, as it is more popularly known, *Tobyä*), as gripping in its plot and characterization as it was fascinating in its resourceful and innovative vocabulary and idiom. Tekle Hawaryat reputedly wrote the first Amharic play, *Fabula*. But, it was Heruy who could probably be best described as the father of modern Amharic literature. His literary works had a decidedly didactic slant about them. But, he also showed subtlety in some of his other works, such as *Yaleb Hasab*, *Addis Alam*, *Wadaje Lebe* (Bahru 2002: 158–61).

As in so many other spheres, this exciting experiment in historiography, linguistics and literature was rudely interrupted by the Italian invasion of 1935 and the subsequent occupation. On the other hand, that interlude was to be the backdrop for much of the literary work after liberation, particularly in the immediate post-war period. Among the first of the post-Liberation writers was Makonnen Endalkachew, who, from his idyllic residence on the outskirts of Addis, produced a series of novels and short stories that earned him more fame than his exploits as the first post-war prime minister. Makonnen continued the didactic tradition of Heruy in his novels and at the same time dabbled in some amateurish history writing, including an unflattering portrayal of Tewodros (*Taytu Betul*), and a family biography of his Addisge clan (*Malkam Betasaboch*: 'An Exemplary Family').

46 Makonnen's fellow minister, Germachaw Tekle Hawaryat, also produced a literary masterpiece of the immediate post-war period,

Araya. The title has a *double entendre*, denoting both the name of the hero and a 'role model'. The plot sits astride the Italian invasion and narrates the anguished quest of a foreign-educated Ethiopian for the best way of modernizing his country; the character is commonly thought to be the author's father and one of the 'pioneers of change', *Bajerond* Tekle Hawaryat (Bahru 2002: 57–64). Just as the ultimately frustrated Tekle Hawaryat eschews government service after his return from prolonged exile and retires to his farm at Hirna, so does Araya, unable to push forward his ideas of reform, give up his government post to farm on his inherited land (Fekade 2003: 313).

But, undoubtedly the writer who had the greatest impact on the post-war generation was Kebede Mika'el, first laureate in 1964 of the Haile Sellassie I Prize for Amharic literature. His literary accomplishments had an exceptionally wide range: he was poet, playwright, biographer and historian. His parables – *Tarat-na Mesale* – were used as primary school textbooks and had a formative influence on many a young Ethiopian. His plays were also regularly performed in schools. Two of them were adaptations of Western classics: Shakespeare's romantic tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*, which constituted the principal fare of dramatic performance in the 1950s, and Goethe's *Faust* (rendered as *Ato Belaynah waym KaYeqerta Belay*). Through these plays and the other poems that he composed, Kebede set a pattern of Amharic versification that has endured the test of time, even if it came to be rivalled and even superseded by the new pattern that was blazed in the 1960s by the poet-playwright, Tsegaye Gebre Medhin. Like the 'pioneers of change', Kebede was fascinated by Japan and wrote a book, *Japan Endamen Salatanach* ('How Japan Modernized'), effectively urging Ethiopia to emulate the Japanese model of modernization. The issue of modernization preoccupied him quite a bit, inducing him to write two more books on the subject: *Ityopyana Merabawa Seltane* ('Ethiopia and Western Civilization') and *YaSeletane Ayar* ('The Wind of Civilization'). His fascination with famous historical figures led him to write a play on Hannibal, devote a book to Alexander the Great and write a collection of biographical sketches entitled *Talalaq Sawoch* ('Great Men'), featuring Homer, Peter the Great and Napoleon, among others (Balashova 2007: 315–6).

Kebede's counterpart in the realm of historiography was Tekle Tsadeq Makurya, whom this author has characterized elsewhere as a transitional figure forming a bridge between the proto-modern historiography of the 'pioneers' and the professional historians of the post-1960 era. Just as Kebede shaped the post-war generation of Ethiopians through his poems and plays, Tekle Tsadeq moulded their historical consciousness through his history books, notably his popular reconstruction of modern Ethiopian history from the reign of Tewodros to that of Haile Sellassie, a prelude to his more academic and substantive accounts of the preceding periods. Responding to the practical exigencies of the time was what appears to have driven his

history writing. Thus, his account of the wars of Ahmad Grañ (*YaGrañ Warara*) was essentially a response to the irredentist movement spearheaded by the newly independent Somali republic, just as his trilogy of the history of the reigns of Tewodros, Yohannes and Menilek, woven around the theme of Ethiopian unity, was written in response to the rise of Eritrean secessionism. An important factor of his successful career, which spanned nearly half a decade of active writing, was his use of the Amharic medium, which made him accessible to a broader section of the reading public than was the case with the professional historians, who almost invariably opted for English (Bahru 2008: 22–23).

In the realm of creative writing, Amharic literature began to shed off its predilection for didacticism in the 1960s and graduated to social critique and analysis as well as attaining greater technical sophistication. The works of Berhanu Zerihun, Haddis Alemayehu and Tsegaye Gebre Medhin are particularly noteworthy in this regard. Berhanu addressed the critical issue of prostitution in his first novel, *Hulat Yanba Dabdabewoch* ('Two Letters of Tears'). His historical novels, including his major one on Tewodros (*YaTewodros Enba*, 'Tewodros's Tears') demonstrated a more sophisticated deployment of plot and characterization than earlier historical novels or plays. Probably his greatest contribution to Amharic prose was his pioneering of the use of short but powerful sentences as opposed to the rather verbose and ponderous style that had predominated thitherto (Balashova 2003: 538–9).

Likewise, Tsegaye Gebre Medhin attained national and international fame not only for the content and technique of his plays and poems but also for the new style of versification that he pioneered. Even more than Kebede Mika'el, he thrived in Amharic adaptations of Shakespearean plays, including *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Hamlet*. These adaptations have endured in public memory not only for the beauty of their verse but also for the quality of the dramatic performances that they gave rise to under the direction of Tsegaye's life-long companion, Abate Mekuria. Another personality that came to be closely associated with the poet-playwright was arguably the greatest Ethiopian actor of that era, if not of all times, Wegayehu Negatu, who attained the pinnacle of his acting career with his portrayals of the anti-Fascist martyr, *Abuna Petros*, and in his lead role in the revolutionary play, *HaHu BaSedest War* ('ABC in Six Months').

Haddis Alemayehu made his mark on Amharic literature with probably the most influential novel of the post-Liberation era, *Feger eska Maqaber* ('Love unto Death'). Like Tekle Tsadeq, Haddis had his schooling in the pre-war period. But he attained national prominence in both the political and literary sphere in the post-war era, rising to become successively both minister and ambassador. In the imperial regime, ambassadorial appointments were all too often signs of estrangement between the incumbent and the emperor. Haddis's designation as Ethiopian ambassador to England most probably fits into this pattern. What is remarkable, however, is that Haddis put this

'banishment' to good use, as it were, to produce the above-mentioned classic as well as the tract on the political future of the country that we shall discuss in more detail below. *Feger eska Maqaber* has been viewed as a masterly literary dissection of feudal Ethiopia, depicting vividly the vainglory of the rural gentry and the undercurrents of peasant discontent. Moreover, few works have described the elements of traditional church education so vividly and competently. The novel's gripping plot and skilful characterization have equally earned it lasting fame among generations of Ethiopians (Asfaw 2005: 959–60; Fekade 2005: 520–1).

Haddis's implicit critique of feudal Ethiopian society was given a more explicit articulation in the works of another contemporary writer, Abbe Gubegna. His most famous novel was *Alewaladem* ('I Refuse to be Born'), which was banned almost immediately after publication. Written in 1955 EC (1962/63), it depicted the prolonged labours of a pregnant woman, whose child refuses to be born into an unjust and oppressive society. Another explicitly political novel, *Melke'am Sayfa Nabalbal* (after the name and epithet of the protagonist), came out a year later and advocated the introduction of a constitutional monarchy. Even some of his historical books, such as *YaRom Awadadaq* ('The Fall of Rome'), were viewed as a veiled critique of the existing political order. But it was his overtly political style that brought him into trouble with the powers that be. He was detained as he prepared to run for parliament and banished for three years to the southwestern province of Illubabor (Fekade 2003: 30–31).

The increasing sophistication of literary production was paralleled by the flowering of the arts, particularly in the 1960s. Ethiopia has a long tradition of ecclesiastical art, manifested in the icons, murals and manuscript illuminations that were an important ingredient of the country's Christian heritage. These paintings go back to at least the fourteenth century and attained increasing sophistication over time, reaching their peak in what is known as the Gondar period, i.e. the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Modern Ethiopian art had its origin in the sculpture of Abbebe Welde Giyorgis and the paintings of Agagnahu Engeda. Both of them studied in France, Agagnahu going to the prestigious École des Beaux Arts in Paris. Although they had gone for their studies before the war, it was after the war that they made their impact on the artistic scene in Ethiopia. Agagnahu was followed by Afework Tekle, who returned from his studies in London in the 1950s to introduce a highly stylized version of modern art. Although his predilection for painting only the prosperous and the beautiful was to put him at cross-purposes with the radical students of the 1960s, he was able to attain considerable international fame.

An important feature of post-war education was the fostering of artistic creation in the school system through mandatory instructions in painting. Indeed, the ministry in charge of administering the educational system in the country was known for long as the Ministry of

Education and Fine Arts. Both Abbebe and Agagnahu had administrative posts in the ministry's Department of Fine Arts (Achamyelch 2007: 10–11). But, it was with the founding of the Addis Ababa Fine Arts School in 1964 that modern – as well as modernist – art could be said to have started to blossom. The director of that school for the first decade of its existence was Ale Felege Salam, who came from a family of prominent traditional artists, including his grandfather, *Alaqa* Heruy, and his uncle, Ema'elaf Heruy. Among those whom he attracted to join the faculty of the Fine Arts School were two artists who could be described as the pioneers of modernist art – Gebre Kristos Desta and Skunder Boghossian (*ibid.*, 11–14). Most of the Ethiopian painters who are still active owe their training to these two masters. Although Gebre Kristos introduced a new – almost revolutionary – style of painting, it did not take long for his paintings to be appreciated by the Addis Ababa public. An exhibition that he staged in June 1963 was instantly successful, with a number of the seventy-one paintings on display actually being bought by Ethiopians with moderate income (AZ, 24.10.55/1.7.63). Gebre Kristos was a prolific poet as well as a painter and his recital of his own poems was electrifying.

Gebre Kristos belonged to an emerging cultural elite of writers, painters and musicians, whose members, beside excelling in their distinctive professions, also interacted intensely among themselves. They met at informal forums and later at the Creative Centre, established within the premises of Haile Sellassie I University in 1962 (Heran & Shiferaw 2007: 23–24). Although it had its ups and downs, the centre grew to be a vibrant venue for the performance of many plays as well as the recital of poems. An example of its contribution to enriching the cultural life of the city was its organization of a culture week in 1969 that combined poetry recitals, performances of Tsegaye Gebre Medhin's much-acclaimed play *Yakarmo Saw* ('The Seasoned' or 'A Man for All Seasons') and Mengistu Lemma's *Talfo Bakise* ('Marriage by Abduction'), panel discussions on Amharic prose and Ethiopian painting and showing of films from different countries. It also housed a unique band called Orchestra Ethiopia which embarked on a fascinating experiment of blending traditional and modern music. It was also at the Creative Centre that two of the greatest actors of the time – Debebe Eshetu and Wegayehu Negatu – started their illustrious careers (AR, I, 1: 3.1.69).

Also serving as fora for the discussion of cultural and social issues were two important periodicals – *Manan* and *Addis Reporter*. The first was a government-owned monthly magazine that started to appear in November 1955, coinciding with the Silver Jubilee of Emperor Haile Sellassie's coronation and named after his spouse as a token of recognition of her contribution to the modernization of the country. It was first published by the Hagar Feger Theatre but was subsequently taken over by the Ministry of Information. Besides carrying regular reports of imperial activities, the periodical published profiles of personalities who

have made their mark on the social and cultural scene (Fekade 2007: 719–20). Of shorter duration but probably with the greatest impact on the intellectual life of the country was *Addis Reporter*, which started as a weekly but soon had to opt for a monthly issue. It too was published by the Hagar Feqer Theatre and its first issue appeared on 3 January 1969. Although the periodical was able to attract a number of regular columnists, its two leading spirits were Gedamu Abraha and Solomon Deressa. In contrast to such rather light-hearted regular columns as ‘The View from Arat Kilo’ and ‘Finfine Diary’, the two columnists gave profound if rather caustic analyses of Ethiopian society and the Ethiopian psyche. In an article entitled ‘The Amharic Dime-Novel’, for instance, Solomon Deressa gave a scathing critique of the flurry of Amharic novels that were appearing at the time, quite a few of them offering various renditions of ‘love’, as their titles almost invariably indicated.

The theme of the ‘hyphenated Ethiopian’ also preoccupied the two authors for quite a while. They addressed the subject in a series of two articles in February 1969. ‘The educated Ethiopian’, they said at the outset of their densely constructed exposé, ‘is Ethiopia in transition’. ‘Passing from the annual harvest to the monthly salary and from the homestead to the apartment, we have exchanged communal security for individual destinies’ (AR, I, 6: 7.2.69). Nothing illustrates better what the authors characterize as the ‘peacock vanity’ of the hyphenated Ethiopian than his wedding: ‘The wedding of the hyphenated Ethiopian is a microcosm of his style of life . . . The one who has a VW [Volkswagen] borrows a Peugeot for the occasion. The one who has a Peugeot borrows a Mercedes and the one who finds a Mercedes far too ordinary would borrow an American car – the ultimate symbol of the hyphenated ego’ (AR, I, 7: 14.2.69).

In another article series entitled ‘Non Sequitur’, they exposed in caustic fashion various Ethiopian idiosyncrasies, such as laughing at the climax of a tragedy play or of painters not signing their works until recently. They summed up the contradictory nature of life in Ethiopia – a nation of ‘peaceful peasants and predatory warriors’ – in the following manner:

Our existence is burdened with the rituals of religiosity but we are not that religious; we talk a great deal about history and culture while we remain blissfully ignorant of our own history and culture; that we have far too rigid fasting customs but that we do not know the difference between normal eating and gluttony; that we are polite but vain and arrogant; kind and hospitable but cruel and distant. Is the Ethiopian a special blend of incongruities and mutually antagonistic elements? (AR, I, 27: 4.7.69; 28: 11.7.69)

Modern Ethiopian music had its birth at the Hagar Feqer Mahbar (subsequently renamed Hagar Feqer Theatre), which was founded on the eve of the Italian invasion to drum up patriotic sentiments. In the post-war period, it shifted to the occupations that had made it famous ever since – musical and dramatic performance. It began by nurturing

the first modern Amharic singers, such as Iyo'el Yohannes and Tilahun Gessesse. With the expansion of the modern military in the 1950s, the musical bands of the various units begin to overshadow that pioneer institution. Indeed the Imperial Bodyguard Band came to embody modern Ethiopian music and some of the songs released by it came to be associated – rightly or wrongly – with the growing spirit of disenchantment within the unit that culminated in the 1960 coup. Often cited in this regard were the two songs: *Alchalkum* ('I cannot bear it anymore') and *U'uta* ('Crying for Help'). The police band combined a symphony orchestra with the swinging rock and roll of its lead singer, Alemayehu Eshete, while the Army band was notable for its intimidating array of saxophones. Particularly memorable were the annual New Year's Eve music festivals staged by the three military units – the Ground Forces, the Imperial Bodyguard and the Police – subsequently joined by Orchestra Ethiopia.

THE SEEDS OF POLITICAL DISSENT

The culture of 'wax and gold' (*double entendre*, 'wax' denoting the apparent and 'gold' the hidden meaning) had for long provided a convenient medium for political dissent or satire in Ethiopia. Hence the prominent place that *qené* poetry has occupied in the traditional Ethiopian educational system. Hence, too, the reputation enjoyed by a figure such as *Alaqa* Gebre Hanna, to whom so many witty 'wax and gold' expressions have been attributed. Such witticisms exonerated the author from direct responsibility while it gave the reader/listener ample latitude for interpretation (Tigab 2012). Thus, Tilahun Gessesse's famous songs, *Alchalkum* and *U'uta* might or might not have been intended as expressions of political discontent. But what mattered was the popular perception of their import.

While such covert expressions of discontent may have represented the relatively safe option, they did not rule out more overt manifestations of dissent. As a matter of fact, such overt political dissent began to manifest itself soon after Liberation and continued intermittently until the more strident student protests of the 1960s and 1970s. The early manifestations of dissent were in many ways spill-overs of the war of liberation. They started with the insubordination of the Gojjame Resistance leader, Belay Zeleqe, in early 1943 and culminated in the 1951 plot to unseat the emperor led by *Bitwaddad* Negash Bezabih, another leader of the Resistance in Gojjam. Barely a decade later, the very same person who took part in the capture of Belay and foiled Negash's plot, Mengistu Neway, led an abortive coup d'état against the throne. Although suppressed, the coup did not pass without leaving its mark on the Ethiopian political landscape.

Post-liberation tremors

The return of Emperor Haile Sellassie to the throne in May 1941 symbolized the end of the short but eventful Fascist occupation of the country. Yet the full restoration of his imperial authority was not an altogether smooth affair. While many of the patriots who led the resistance to the occupation welcomed him as their legitimate ruler, there were a few who were not comfortable about his regaining the throne after spending the occupation years in the relative safety of exile while they were staking out their lives for the liberation cause. Such disgruntlement became particularly acute when their post-liberation rewards were deemed to be incommensurate with the sacrifices they had sustained.

Such was the genesis of the tense confrontation between Belay Zeleqe and the emperor in 1943. Belay was arguably the most charismatic leader of the Ethiopian resistance to Fascist occupation. From his base in Bechana (eastern Gojjam), he conducted a successful campaign that earned him prominence among the resistance leaders in that province. On his return, the emperor was understandably wary of the popularity that the young resistance leader had come to enjoy. He first tried to remove him from his power base by appointing him governor of one of the southern provinces. When he demurred, he was confirmed in his governorship of his native district with the title of *Dajjazmach*. This was a much lower title than he had expected and he was particularly unhappy that the one he had coveted, the governorship or deputy governorship of the province, had gone to his rivals, Ras Haylu Belew (grandson of the dynastic ruler of Gojjam, *Negus* Tekle Haymanot) and *Bitwaddad* Mengesha Jembere (leader of the resistance in northern Gojjam), respectively. Even more unsettling for him were the elevated posts that were given to known collaborators (*banda*) in the new political dispensation. When he started expressing his displeasure by flouting imperial commands, he was surrounded by a combined provincial and imperial force. He surrendered after standing his ground for three months. Some months later, he was caught as he tried to escape from detention and was subsequently hanged publicly (Bahru 2001: 210).

Some eight years later, it was the turn of another Gojjame patriotic leader, *Bitwaddad* Negash Bezabih (another grandson of *Negus* Tekle Haymanot), to challenge the imperial throne. While Belay's act of defiance was a solitary affair, Negash's plot involved a number of people and had greater impact on the political centre. Indeed, recent evidence seems to suggest that Negash was apparently drafted into the undertaking rather later in the game. Among his co-plotters were Yohannes Ramha, who had also been active during the Resistance; *Alaqa* Fetene Yegzaw, who had rallied the people of Gondar against the Italian invasion and occupation; and Lt Bekele Anasimos, a French-educated military officer who had received special training in the manipulation of the Oerlikon anti-aircraft gun before the war and had accompanied the emperor to the Maychaw front in 1928. Also privy to the plot but

ultimately turning into a stool-pigeon was the famous Resistance leader in southwestern Shawa, *Fitawrari* Geresu Duki. The plotters were apprehended on cue immediately after they had assembled at the house of *Fitawrari* Geresu and had signed their declaration vowing to terminate monarchical rule – including reportedly the assassination of the reigning emperor – and proclaim a republic. They were brought in front of a special tribunal of nine judges. The plotters did not deny the charges, the only heated exchange occurring when Negash vented his anger at Geresu for his betrayal. The plotters were condemned to death by the judges but the sentence was commuted to thirty-years' imprisonment after the condemned begged for pardon when they were brought before the emperor for confirmation of the verdict (Bellele 2004 EC: 213–7).⁹

The plot appears to have been allowed to mature by the government in order to trap all disgruntled elements and neutralize them. Thus, three of the initial plotters were actually stool pigeons planted by the government itself. Geresu himself appears to have turned into a government informer when, after joining the plot in earnest because of his own grievances at being neglected after Liberation, he saw one of the so-called plotters coming out of the office of the emperor's aide, Colonel (later General) Makonnen Deneqe. Among the people the 'plotters' tried to entice into the plot, albeit unsuccessfully, was Dr Alemewerq Beyyene. A veterinary doctor, he had been president of the Black Lion organization, a highly motivated band of young patriots who fought against the Fascist occupying force in southwestern Ethiopia under the leadership of *Ras* Emeru Haile Sellassie. He miraculously escaped the Graziani Massacre of February 1937 but was apprehended later and spent the remaining years of the Italian Occupation at the Danane concentration camp in Italian Somaliland. After Liberation, he organized a political grouping of over one hundred young Ethiopians called *Yawatatoch Mench* ('Fountain of Youth'), helping to finance his activities through proceeds from a night club that he set up for the purpose. An assassination attempt that cost him his left arm through a bomb blast as he was coming out of the night club one evening brought his political activity to an abrupt end (*ibid.*: 220–6).

Nor did the saga end with the sentencing of those apprehended. While the informers were rewarded for their troubles – Geresu being promoted to the governorship of Ilubabor province and *Fitawrari* Desta Fesseha, grandson of *Kawo* Tona, getting his ancestral Walayta sub-province, among others – the hunt for other malcontents went on. Among those caught in the net was Berru Gosheye, Director-General of the Post Office. He was incriminated because of a treatise on revolution he had translated from French into Amharic, which was found with the plotters. He was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment. Seyfu Mika'el, Administrator of the Ethiopian Orthodox

⁹ The commutation was to life imprisonment, according to another source (Qale Kristos 1997 EC: 61–62); three of the plotters, including Yohannes Ramha, died in prison.

Church, was less fortunate. In the wake of the trial and conviction of the plotters, he confided to his friends that the government should not equate demands for administrative reform with treason, adding that a suppressed dissent will come back with vengeance to haunt the regime unless the issues raised by the dissenters were addressed. His musings got into the wrong ears and he was bundled off from his office and he died in miserable captivity (*ibid.*: 226–30).

Someone who was not involved in the plot nor caught in the backlash was yet another patriot leader, *Blatta* Takkele Welde Hawaryat. This was because he was in detention at the time, serving a second term in prison since the Liberation. His opposition to the emperor, which assumed the character of a personal duel, started with the latter's decision to seek asylum after the defeat in Maychaw in 1936 rather than continue the resistance inside the country, as Takkele and some other patriots had hoped and urged. During the Occupation, Takkele strove without much success to create a united front among the disparate patriotic forces. Feeling that the monarchy had abdicated its historical responsibility with the flight of the emperor, he began to harbour republican inclinations. After the restoration of the emperor to the throne, he dedicated his life to trying to terminate his rule, the more so as he felt that the post-Liberation order was based on a tacit accord between exiles and collaborators (*banda*). No imperial measure of either admonition or co-option could chasten or mollify the old warrior. The last act of this dramatic duel was played out in November 1969. His plot to assassinate the emperor in the outskirts of Addis foiled, he barricaded himself in his house and died in the ensuing shootout (Bahru 2001: 174, 210–11). Coincidentally, about a month later the student leader Tilahun Gizaw was gunned down by unidentified assassins. This conjuncture gave both opponents of the imperial regime iconic status, giving birth to the famous pseudonym, Tilahun Takele, used by the author of the most influential tract in the student movement on the national question (see Chapter 6).

The 1960 coup

In the three decades between Liberation and Revolution, no event shook the imperial regime or attracted as much public attention as the abortive coup d'état of December 1960. It has rightly been described as a watershed in the history of political dissent in that period. It marked the end of the era of plots and conspiracies and the beginning of open defiance, as evidenced above all by the increasingly militant student protests. While there might have been some premonitions of a possible military coup, few people had expected it to come from the Imperial Bodyguard, the most favoured and privileged unit of the military. The leader of the coup, Brigadier General Mengistu Neway, had the reputation of a debonair socialite rather than that of a political schemer or agitator. In two major preceding challenges of the regime, far from being a partisan, he had been the loyal executor of imperial orders

to quash them. Thus, he was the officer who apprehended *Lej Belay Zelleqe* after his escape from prison in 1943 and effectively led him to the gallows. Likewise, he (then a colonel) led the unit that surprised the group rallied around *Bitwaddad Negash Bezabih* in the house of *Fitawrari Geresu Duki* in the summer of 1951 as they finalized their plot. Interestingly enough, also member of that unit was Lt (later Colonel) *Warqenah Gebeyehu*, who also emerged as one of the leaders of the 1960 coup (Qale Kristos 1997 EC: 61).

There is general consensus that the intellectual inspiration for the coup came from Mengistu's younger brother, *Gername Neway*. His life combined a passionate quest for social equity and a tireless search for the organizational setup that would make that possible. He had his most formative educational career at Columbia University, where he did his Masters in the 1950s (after a first degree at the University of Wisconsin), writing a thesis on the alienation of Kikuyu lands by British settlers. As he passionately defended the Kikuyu's rights to their ancestral lands, he also fired indirect salvos at the inequities of the land tenure system in his own country. The Pan-African ambience of his Columbia sojourn also probably explains the African context within which the coup-makers placed their indictment of the imperial regime in their only public manifesto in December 1960.

Gername's quest for organization started with his assumption of the presidency of the Ethiopian Students Association in North America (ESANA), replacing its not-so-combative first president, *Tafarra Deguefe*. On his return to Ethiopia, he was in the forefront of what came to be known as the *Qachane Club*, an informal discussion forum for fellow returnees from abroad, including *Mika'el Emeru*, *Ketema Yefru* and *Zewde Gebre Sellassie*. When that club ceased to function through a combination of internal discord and government harassment, he tried setting up an alumni association of his old secondary school, *Haile Sellassie I Secondary School (Kotebe)*, as well as infiltrating the youth association of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, *Haymanota Abaw*. It was presumably after the frustration of all these endeavours that he resorted to his brother's military unit to bring about the change that he had been seeking for so long (Bahru 2008: 241, 242, 248).

If *Gername's* experience in the sphere of organization before the coup was one of repeated frustration, the two brothers' organization of the coup itself was characterized by a degree of ineptitude that eventually cost them their lives and those of many others. Part of the explanation for this appears to be that, although they had been planning for such a coup, the actual implementation of that plan was rather precipitate, as they began to suspect that the private security setup of the powerful minister of finance, *Makonnen Habte Weld*, was on their track and they tried to pre-empt the retaliatory action that would ensue. Even *Warqenah Gebeyehu*, generally considered to be the third leader of the coup, was informed of the plan at a late stage.

56 Brigadier General *Tsige Dibu*, commander of the police, was effectively

commandeered into the whole enterprise. As it turned out, the Rapid Deployment Force (*Fatno Darash*) led by Colonel Taddese Berru, which was theoretically under Tsige's command, was to play a crucial role in the suppression of the coup. Other officers of the Imperial Bodyguard who were to play a key role in the fight that ensued were drafted under the camouflage of foiling a coup that was allegedly being staged by the Army. As for the other military leaders, far from winning them over to their side or neutralizing them, the coup leaders left them alone, blissfully assuming that they would join once they declared their intention for change (Bahru 2001: 213; Qale Kristos 1997 EC: 118–9).

A turning point in the unravelling of the coup was a telephone conversation in the evening of 13 December between the chief of staff, Major General Merid Mengesha, and his sister W/O Qonjit, who alerted him that her husband, defence minister *Ras* Abbebe Aregay, had not returned after having been summoned to the palace allegedly because Empress Manan was ill. Merid's worst suspicions were confirmed when Princess Tanagnewerq, the emperor's eldest daughter, told him that a number of dignitaries had been detained in the palace after being lured with the story of a coup plot by the Army. Merid immediately linked up with his subordinate army commanders, Major General Kebede Gebre and Brigadier General Isayyas Gebre Sellassie. From their base at the First Army Division headquarters in the southern part of the capital, the loyalist commanders began to plan their strategy for foiling the coup. They were assisted in this by the still-at-large influential aristocrat, *Ras* Asrate Kasa, who sent *Dajjach* Kebede Tesemma to Dabra Berhan to mobilize a force to crush the coup. Even more crucial for loyalist success was the arrival of the tanking unit from Nazareth before fighting flared. The loyalists also won over the head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the patriarch Abuna Basilios, who anathematized the rebels. The imperial representative in Eritrea and the emperor's son-in-law, Brigadier General Abiy Abbebe, acted as the crucial liaison with the emperor, who was then on a state visit to Brazil. When the Air Force joined the loyalists, the suppression of the coup became inevitable. Apart from spraying the city with leaflets containing the patriarch's anathema and thus eroding public sympathy for the coup, Merid credited the Air Force bombardments with reducing the fighting capacity of the Bodyguard by 75 per cent in one day alone (AZ, 15.4.53/24.12.60; Qale Kristos 1997 EC: 147–8). The USA, the major foreign power in the country, also sided with the loyalists after some half-hearted attempt to broker a deal between the two antagonistic parties.

But, before they were silenced under the barrage of artillery fire and air bombardments, the coup-makers did manage to get their message across. They took control of the radio and persuaded the Crown Prince, Asfa Wasan, to read a manifesto explaining the circumstances that had triggered the coup. A dominant theme of the manifesto, which was played repeatedly over the radio, was Ethiopia's backwardness in

comparison with even the recently liberated African states. The crown prince vowed to serve the country as a salaried constitutional monarch and improve the lot of the masses. Curiously enough, apart from emphasizing the need to increase agricultural production, the manifesto did not broach the crucial issue of land reform in any meaningful sense. But, even as the loyalist opposition was solidifying, the coup-makers announced on 14 December a new government headed by the progressive prince and cousin of the emperor, *Ras Emeru Haile Sellassie*, with the equally popular predecessor of Mengistu as commander of the Imperial Bodyguard, General Mulugeta Buli, as chief of staff of the armed forces, a position he had held prior to Merid. It was Mulugeta rather than Mengistu who had been viewed by the emperor with some suspicion of harbouring a coup plot; he had thus been moved from his military command to the relatively innocuous post of minister of community development some years before the coup (Qale Kristos 1997 EC: 129). In a bid to win over the soldiers of all units, the coup-makers also announced a raise in their salaries.

The inevitable showdown between rebels and loyalists started in the early afternoon of 15 December with the bombardment of the loyalist headquarters by the Bodyguard artillery. Simultaneously, various rebel units were deployed to approach the loyalist headquarters in a kind of pincer movement. But, by early on in the evening, it was clear that the rapid overpowering of the loyalists that the rebels had hoped for was far from materializing. On the contrary, rebel forces were recoiling under the determined counter-offensive launched by the loyalist command. Many of the rebel soldiers had also started to waver as they realized through the leaflets dropped by the Air Force jets the true nature of the mission that had been thrust on them. By the morning of 16 December, the fighting was practically over and the rebel leaders were running for their life. Before they did that, however, they committed an act that aggravated their crime when they were subsequently captured and could be said to have ushered in a culture of blood-letting that was to assume even more tragic proportions in the wake of the 1974 revolution. In a final act of desperation, they executed the hostages – ministers and members of the nobility – that they had kept in the palace. As the rebels died fighting or made their exit out of the city, the emperor entered the capital triumphantly – much to the jubilation of the city crowds, who preferred the reassurance of the old to the uncertainty of the new.

As the regime launched its manhunt for the Neway brothers, it simultaneously utilized its propaganda machinery to the full to reassert its authority. The Amharic daily, *Addis Zaman*, carried a series of reports and interviews on the foiling of the coup. Thus, the *Tahsas* 12 (21 December) issue carried the press conference the emperor gave to foreign journalists, in which he described the coup as the work of a handful of traitors, with possibly a foreign hand as could be gleaned from the proclamation; the crown prince and the university

college students only collaborated under duress. Although he claimed that the coup was directed against his government rather than him personally, he felt no need to change his government or policy; only the unpleasant task of finding replacements for the slain ministers remained. He had particularly harsh words for his ambassador in Sweden, Teferi Sharew, who, besides sympathizing with the coup leaders, tried to woo over the emperor's grandson, who was chargé d'affaires in Stockholm, to the coup side (AZ, 12.4.53/21.12.60). Subsequent issues of the Amharic daily carried interviews with Generals Merid Mengesha, Abiy Abbebe, Kebede Gebre and Isayyas Gebre Sellassie, who all gave details on various aspects of the suppression of the coup (AZ, 15.4.53/24.12.60, 17.4.53/26.12.60, 18.4.53/27.12.60, 21.4.53/30.12.60). Further, in his speech on Ethiopian Christmas Day (January 7), the emperor was at pains to recount his achievement since he became heir to the throne in 1916 and emphasized the point that the recent coup, which succeeded merely in causing bloodshed and the loss of officials who had served their country with dedication, was the work of infantile criminals (AZ, 29.4.53/7.1.61).

The emperor elaborated on what he confidently felt was his unblemished record in a major policy speech that he gave to ministers and other high government officials in April 1961. He reminded them where Ethiopia was thirty years back: a pawn of colonial powers, isolated, feudal and subject to the caprices of kings and the nobility. He highlighted in particular his achievements in the expansion of education, often battling against conservative elements, his granting of the country's first constitution, the opening of banks and telecommunications – although these two institutions actually pre-date his reign – as well as the establishment of Ethiopian Airlines and the revised constitution of 1955. The legislative power of the Ethiopian parliament was every bit as full as that of any other legislative body in a parliamentary system, he averred. The country's budget, he claimed, had risen from Eth\$11 million in 1941 to 279 million by 1960. A major refrain of the speech was that the ministers should thenceforth assume full responsibility for the tasks entrusted them, freeing him from the micro-management of government affairs that had been the practice until then, so that he would concentrate on the broader issues of national concern (AZ, 6.8.53/14.4.61).

Soon after the suppression of the coup, the emperor rewarded his loyal generals with promotions and higher appointments. Merid and Kebede were both promoted to lieutenant general, Merid being elevated to the post of minister of defence vacated by the slain *Ras* Abbebe Aregay, while Kebede replaced Merid as chief of staff of the armed forces (AZ, 30.5.53/6.2.61). Meanwhile, Addis Ababans were treated to the gruesome display of the hanged bodies of coup leaders who had either been killed by the loyalists or had committed suicide, including those of Germame and Warqenah. Mengistu, who was captured severely wounded in his eye, was treated to a more dignified

trial which was attended by international observers and lasted for about a month. The court finally passed its verdict towards the end of March 1961, condemning the defendant to death by hanging. He had been charged with attempting to overthrow the legally constituted government, detaining ministers and other high government officials and massacring fifteen hostages (AZ, 20.7.53/29.3.61). Mengistu refused to appeal his case, stating in the defiant statement that he read that he would have done so had it been the Ethiopian people who were going to review his case. He had taken the action that he did not to cause bloodshed, as alleged, but to bring unity, freedom and progress to the Ethiopian people. He expressed his satisfaction that he had been able to witness before his death the realization of at least one of the objectives of the coup, which is raising the salary of the soldiers. He told the judges that, had they been as swift in giving judgment to the many poor people who spent ten to fifteen years in litigation as they had been in condemning him, there would have been no need for the coup in the first place. He finished off his peroration with the following almost prophetic words:

ዋ! ዋ! ዋ! ለእናንተና ለገዢዎችህ የኢትዮጵያ ሕዝብ ሐሳብ በዝርዝር ገብቶት በእንድነት በሚነሳበት ጊዜ የሚወርድባችሁ መዓት የሚያሰቅቅ ይሆናል፡፡

Woe to you and your master! One dreads to think of the calamity that awaits you when the people of Ethiopia fully understand my intention and rise against you in unison!

(Mengistu's statement)

Mengistu's defiance continued to reverberate in the following months. Far from quelling discontent, the punitive measures taken against the coup leaders tended to inspire strident opposition. Clandestine leaflets condemning the regime and eulogizing the rebels began to circulate soon after the coup. They bore such unrelenting titles as 'Better be a lion for a day and die than live the life of a lamb for a thousand days', 'There is no solution without blood', and 'What is sinful is to be ruled by despots, not to rise against them' (Bahru 2001: 214). Barely three weeks after the suppression of the coup, the government daily *Addis Zaman* reported that three persons were flogged for spreading 'false rumours' (AZ, 28.4.53/6.1.61).

But perhaps the most unsparing castigation of the regime, or rather the emperor personally, was written about fourteen months after the coup. It was in the form of a rather wildly aggressive open letter to the emperor from a group (or individual) that called itself (or himself) 'Yaltyopya Hezb Yamulu Natsanat Mangest Mahbar' ('Association of the Ethiopian People for a Government of Total Freedom'). The author(s) began by stating that the tract was written not with the illusion that the emperor would mend his ways but only to expose him to the outside world. The thirty-two-page tract divided the emperor's

reign (including the regency) into five periods: the era of conspiracy (up to 1930), the era of Yodit (1930–35), the era of invasion (1935–41), the era of iniquity (1941–60), and the era of lunacy (1960–). There was hardly any crime that the emperor was not accused of: the death of his father (driving him insane), his elder brother (by poisoning) and even of his loyal foreign minister Heruy Welde Sellassie (by poisoning, while in exile in London) as well as hiring an assassin to kill, albeit unsuccessfully, Teferi Sharew, the Ethiopian ambassador in Sweden who had come out openly on the side of the coup. It went on to compare him with the ruthless Fascist Italian viceroy, Graziani, the only difference being that the Fascist viceroy massacred Ethiopians brazenly while the emperor killed them silently.

Another crime that the tract imputed to the emperor was to have a recurrent ring, particularly in the first months of the 1974 revolution: the amassment of inordinate wealth both at home and abroad, including by selling his former palace to the University for fifty million birr, although the government media commonly trumpeted it as an act of gracious donation. Another allegation that was to persist was that the emperor's favoured son, Prince Makonnen, did not die of a car accident, as reported, but was shot by an enraged husband whose wife had been seduced by the prince. The tract concluded with the following ringing declaration of the emperor's ultimate fate:

ደም ካልፈሰሰ ስርየት የለም፡፡ እስከ አሁን የድሃው ኢትዮጵያ ሕዝብ ደም የፈሰሰው ብቻውንና አለፈቃዱም ነው፡፡ ከእንግዲህ ወዲያ ግን የጠላቶቹን ደም ለማፍሰስ የእራሱን ደም በፈቃዱ ያፈሳል፡፡ ይህ ትውልድ በባርነት ከሚኖር በደም ያልፋል፤ የሚመጣው ትውልድ ግን ያለ ደም በነፃነት ይኖራል፡፡ ስለዚህም እንደ ዶሮ በካራ ታርዶ ከማለቅ እንደ ጀግና በጦር ተዋግቶ መሞትን መርጧል፡፡ ከብት ሲርበው ይለግማል፤ ሰው ሲርበው ምን ያደርጋል? እርሱ እርቦት የሚጠግቡትን ይገድላል፡፡ በፈቃዱም የደም ባሕር ይፈጥራል፤ ሕግንና ፍርድን በእጁ ይጨብጣል፤ ዓይኖቹን በጥቁር ጨርቅ ተጋርዶ በነበረባቸው ዘመናት የተወሰዱበትን ሃብቶችና መብቶች በሥልጣኑ አስመልሶ ይከፋፈላል፤ በዚያን ጊዜ የግድ እንጂ የውድ ቃል ትርጉም አይገባውም፤ አሁን እንደሚደረገው ሁሉ የፕሮፓጋንዳ ምሕረት አያውቅም፤ ቃሉ ሥራው ነው፤ ሥራው ሕጉ ነው፤ ይህ ቀን ደርሷል፤ እርስዎ እንደ ውሻ ይገደላሉ፤ ልጆችዎና ዘርዎ በነፃይቱ የደም ዋጋ ኢትዮጵያ ተራ ሰው እንኳን ሆነው ለመኖር የሚገጥማቸው ዕድል በጣም አጠራጣሪ ይሆናል፡፡ (IES CL 2393/07/1/10)

There is no salvation without bloodshed. Until now, only the poor has been forced to shed his blood. From now on, he will shed his blood willingly in order to shed the blood of his enemies. This generation would rather pass away in blood rather than live in servitude, so that the next generation will live in freedom and without bloodshed. It has therefore chosen to die the death of a warrior rather than see itself slaughtered like chicken. A hungry animal is stingy on its service. What will a hungry man do? He has no choice but to kill those who feast while he starves. He will create a pool of blood, put law and justice in his grasp, and reclaim the wealth and the rights that were taken away from him in the age of darkness. Then, he will only understand the language of violence, not of consent. The kind of fake mercy that we see today will be alien to him. His word is his deed, his deed his law. That day has arrived. You [the emperor] will be killed

like a dog. The chance of your children and your kin to live even the life of an ordinary citizen in an Ethiopia that has been redeemed by blood will be highly doubtful.

The parallels between this tract and the more famous one attributed to Walelign Mekonnen in 1969 entitled *La'awaju Awaj* are striking, including the allegation that the emperor did not in actual fact donate his palace to the university. Both tracts claim that he had been paid for it, Walelign adding for good measure that the emperor had left the palace because he was having nightmares after the massacre of his ministers in the final stage of the 1960 coup! Yet, one is struck by the relatively more strident (not to say downright abusive) nature of the 1962 tract, even though it was written seven years earlier. Walelign's was more in the nature of a point by point rebuttal of the emperor's speech broadcast earlier, castigating the students who had gone on strike for their hasty and premature decisions (see Chapter 5: 156).

There were to be more reasoned tributes to the coup leaders, particularly Germame, in subsequent years. The first such tribute was the book by Richard Greenfield, a close friend of Germame, entitled *Ethiopia: A New Political History*. This rather hastily compiled work is unstinting in its celebration of the coup, making it in effect the culmination of Ethiopian history. Student publications abroad perpetuated this trend. One of the leaders of ESANA, Melesse Ayalew, wrote a highly complimentary review of Greenfield's book, dubbing it 'the best historical account of the 20th century Ethiopia . . . until a better work appears'. The coup, he went on, was the inevitable result of a system incapable of self-reform. It failed because the leaders of the coup 'underestimated the viciousness' of the order they were up against. But the rebels, he concluded, 'left behind a legacy. The seeds they were not too sure to sow [*sic*] have caught the imagination of all Ethiopians except those opportunists who prefer to wait until they are swept aside' (*Challenge*, V: 1).

The Ethiopian Students Union in Europe (ESUE) likewise brought out a commemorative issue of *Tataq* (the theoretical organ of ESUE) on the tenth anniversary of the coup. In a seventeen-page editorial, the paper celebrated the pioneering role of the 'Decembrists'¹⁰ in the on-going struggle for change in Ethiopia, locating them between conservative complacency and revolutionary transformation. The Ethiopian 'Decembrists' had essentially a reformist agenda and failed because they did not enlist the support of even those closest to them, let alone mobilizing the masses. Interestingly, it also traces the antecedents of the rebels in the writings of the 'pioneers of change' of the early twentieth century, as well as the inchoate republican movement of the post-war period. Their major achievement, it argued, was the demystification of the monarchy:

¹⁰ The term, *Tahasaweyan* in Amharic, is used in an apparent evocation of the group of Russian army officers known by that name who entered the history books through their abortive attempt to assassinate Tsar Nicholas I in December 1825.

አፍዝ አደንግዝ ሆኖብን የነበረው የሰብከት አስማት መርከብ ራሱ ርዕዮተአለማዊ ትግላችንን አቃልሎልናል፡፡ ...በአሁኑ ወቅት ህዝቡ ወደአጥቂነት አድሀረው መንግስት ወደተከላካይነት በሚሻገሩበት ድልድይ ላይ ተሰልፈው ይታያሉ፡፡ ይኸውም ከአስር አመት ባነሰ ጊዜ ውስጥ፡፡ በዚህ አኳኋን ያገራችን ህሊናዊና አንፃራዊ ሁኔታዎች ሊገጣጠሙ ምንም አልቀራቸው ማለት ይቻላል፡፡ (Tataq, Miyazya 1963/ April 1971)

The demystification of the cult that had kept us spellbound has in itself made our ideological struggle that much easier . . . At this point in time, the people have moved to the offensive while the reactionary regime has been put on the defensive. And this in a matter of less than ten years. Under the circumstances, one can confidently state that the objective and subjective conditions in our country have almost coincided.

Within the ruling circle as well, its suppression notwithstanding, the 1960 coup provoked stirrings of disquiet. No one probably better articulated this unease than Haddis Alemayehu, the minister of education. Less than two months after the coup, he wrote a memorandum to the emperor pointing out that the recent coup could not have come from the blue. Hence, he urged him to institute reform to avert a more serious challenge to his rule. Knowing his master's vanity, he began his memorandum by commending him for his accomplishments. At the same time, however, he emphasized the fact that the measures that had been taken so far were quite inadequate, particularly in bringing about economic development and expanding education. He recommended the revision of the constitution with a view to initiating genuine parliamentary rule and ministerial responsibility. A radical concept that he introduced was the need to state clearly in the new constitution that sovereignty resides in the people, and not in the monarch, as was stated in the 1955 constitution. He also argued for unfettered freedom of public demonstration and expression, including the introduction of the private press. Somewhat apologetically, he nonetheless concluded his recommendations by emphasizing the need to face reality squarely:

በዚህ ማስታወሻ የገለጽኋቸው አንዳንድ ነገሮችና የገለጽሁበት ቋንቋ ትንሽ መረር ያሉ መሆናቸው ይሰማኛል፡፡ እንዲሁም ሰው ሆኖ ለተፈጠረ ሁሉ ከመራራ እውነት የተቀመመና የለዘበ ከንቱ ውዳሴ እንደሚጣፍጥ አውቃለሁ፡፡ ነገር ግን ዞሮ ዞሮ ከንቱ ውዳሴ የሚያፈራውን ጣፋጭ ፍሬ የሚለቅሙና በሱም የሚጠቀሙ አሞጋሾቹ ብቻ በመሆናቸው ተሞጋሾች ሁልጊዜም ቢሆኑ ከመራራው እውነት ጋር ቀሪዎች ናቸው፡፡ (Haddis 1953 EC)

I am aware that some of the things that I have described in this note and the language that I have employed might be a bit sour. I also know that people generally prefer vain glorification to hearing the bitter truth. But, at the end of the day, those who reap the fruit from vain praise are the sycophants; the vainly glorified are left behind with the bitter truth.

Apparently, nothing came of Haddis's memorandum. Some two years later, in March 1963 to be exact, five other high-placed colleagues

got together at the Langano lakeside resort and agreed to send a petition to the emperor along the same lines. These were Lt General Abiy Abbebe, the emperor's son-in-law and his representative in Eritrea at the time, including during the 1960 coup which he so crucially helped to foil; Lt General Merid Mengesha, minister of defence and chief architect of the suppression of the 1960 coup; *Le'ul Ras* Asrate Kasa, a prominent member of the ruling dynasty and President of the Senate as well as yet another pivotal figure in the suppression of the coup; Lt Colonel Tamrat Yeggazu, imperial representative in Harar; and *Dajjaj-mach* Germachaw Tekle Hawaryat, minister of information. Again, the 1960 coup provided the backdrop for their recommendations, which they anchored on the need to revise the constitution with a view to instituting proper parliamentary rule and investing the prime minister with full authority. The group also cautioned against complacency at the suppression of the coup, predicting rather prophetically that a future military coup would ensure against failure by mobilizing popular support. The response that the six high-placed and largely loyal officials got for their trouble was transfer to provincial or ambassadorial posts. The public even read some sinister plot into Merid's death soon after (*Reporter*, 29.7.1995/7.4.2003).

At about the same time, Abiy Abbebe had written a booklet entitled *Awqan Entaram* ('Let Us Stand Corrected', i.e. before it is too late), wherein he muses about the need for administrative reform. Much of the booklet deals with general moral precepts rather than concrete recommendations for reform. But, occasionally, the author does offer some specific pieces of advice. While he remains critical of people who are too much ahead of their time and urges caution against being unwitting instruments of foreign forces bent on sowing divisions among the people (Abiy 1955 EC: 16–17), he nonetheless points out the value of political opposition, preferably through a two-party system (*ibid.*: 27). He concludes by underlining the vital need for consultation and for instituting a transitional arrangement:

ዋይ ዋይ ከግለት በፊት መወያየት ቢቀድም ብዙ ክፉ ነገሮች አይደርሱም፤ እርስ በእርስም መግባባት ከኖረ በሕብረት ለመሥራት አያዳግትም፡፡ . . . እስከ አሁን እየተራመድንም እየዘለልንም አልፈን ይሆናል፤ አሁን ግን መሽጋገሪያ ድልድያችንን አጥብቀን መገንባት አለብን፤ (*ibid.*: 51)¹¹

¹¹ Interestingly enough, the first edition of the book was published in Asmara, indicating perhaps the discretion that the author felt was necessary not to have it printed in the capital. It was not uncommon for books of a sensitive nature to be printed in Asmara rather than in Addis Ababa, one good example being Taddese *Mecha's Tequr Anbassa BaMe'erab Ityopya* ('Black Lion in Western Ethiopia'). Berhanu Denqe, a critic of the imperial regime who resigned from his ambassadorial post in Washington DC in 1965, actually claims that Abiy's book had been banned ('My Experiences', ch. XI). That the regime could not tolerate even such a decidedly innocuous work tells a lot about the advanced stage of its terminal decay. A second edition of Abiy's book was printed in Addis Ababa in 1974 (1967 EC), presumably after the author had already been detained by the Darg, but most probably before his execution along with nearly three-score former government officials in November 1974.

If we give precedence to discussion, we will avoid lamenting the many bad things that would befall us otherwise. Mutual understanding is the prelude to collective action. . . . We might have fumbled our way up to now. But we should now turn earnestly to building the bridge that will smooth our transition.

In the same year, in July 1963 to be exact, Haddis Alemayehu articulated the concern for political reform in much more eloquent fashion. Entitled unambiguously *Ityopya Men Aynat Astadadar Yasfalgatal* ('What Kind of Administration for Ethiopia?'), the work did not actually see the light of day until the 1974 revolution. Haddis apparently penned down these pages while Ethiopian ambassador in London, the kind of exile post that also gave him the leisure to compose arguably the best novel in Amharic literature, *Feker eska Maqaber* ('Love unto Death'). The booklet was in the nature of an elaboration of the memorandum that Haddis had submitted to the emperor soon after the coup. Addis Hiwet dubs the work 'bourgeois critique at its best' and, contrasting it with the manifesto of the 1960 coup-makers, highlights 'the disparity between the boldness of their initiative and the rather prosaic character of their program', noting however that 'neither was Ato Haddis' lucid program ever matched by action' (Addis Hiwet 1987: 50). Written to avert the more serious challenge to the regime that he saw coming unless the government cured itself of the complacency that it exhibited following the suppression of the coup, Haddis dared publish it only in May 1974. Alas, by then, the revolutionary tide that was sweeping across the country could no longer brook the kind of cautious reform that the booklet was recommending.¹²

He began his eighty-three-page treatise with what was for the time a revolutionary concept: that sovereignty resides in the people; in other words, government is the creation of the people, not the other way round. Even dictators acknowledge this truth when they claim that they are ruling in the name and in the interest of the people. Coming to the central question of the optimal kind of government for Ethiopia, he recommended a ten-year transitional government forged through an amalgam of the democratic and authoritarian forms of government, combining the popular will of the former and the developmental orientation of the latter. A major task of the transitional government would be the drafting of the constitution to regulate the affairs of the country on an enduring basis. The transitional government would be set up after a hotly contested election during which not more than three political parties would present their agenda for administrative reform and accelerated social and economic development. The emperor was to remain as the symbol of the country's unity and honour, without however exercising any power. Legislative authority (subject to ratification by the emperor within a maximum

¹² Haddis does not indicate anywhere whether he showed the booklet to either the emperor or his other colleagues, thus making it impossible to gauge what impact, if any, it had on thinking and policies.

of seven days), as well as the prerogative to vote a government out of power through a two-thirds majority vote, would reside in a national assembly of not more than 350 elected representatives. Judges would enjoy absolute independence in the passing of verdicts. The media were to be completely privatized, subject only to a media board composed of representatives of the media organizations and members designated by the national assembly, the government and the High Court (Haddis 1963).

Perhaps the most dramatic after-effect of the 1960 coup was the resignation of the Ethiopian ambassador in Washington DC, Berhanu Denqe. Although his resignation came nearly five years after the coup, his disenchantment with the imperial regime may have had its roots in that defining moment. He had served as secretary in the Walayta sub-provincial administration, as deputy Mayor of Addis Ababa, Director General of Posts and Chairman of the Ethiopian Telecommunications Board before his ambassadorial appointment. He first aired his disquiet with the regime and the emperor that he had served with diligence in a booklet entitled 'My Experiences in His Majesty's Government', which seems to have been written in the early 1960s. He accused the emperor of megalomania, deliberately incapacitating the crown prince and failing to make the necessary transitional arrangement because he wished his own greatness and indispensability to be remembered when chaos ensued after his death. 'It is as if he does not like the idea of being succeeded by any monarch . . . he would prefer to be remembered as the last monarch to hold the empire together' (Berhanu Denqe n.d.) He noted the emperor's shift from his earlier progressive stance to conservatism once he had achieved his main objective of consolidating power. He was reluctant to give the emperor credit for his much-vaunted patronage of education, criticizing him for his recent efforts to have College Day poems censored (a reference to the 1962 College Day, see Chapter 3: 84) and having the small book by General Abiy Abbebe banned, although the latter had stood by him during the 1960 coup.

On 9 April, 1965, Berhanu officially resigned his ambassadorial post, 'after a great deal of thought and deliberation'. In a much more critical booklet written after his resignation, effectively a kind of 'Unexpected Good-bye to Diplomatic Colleagues', he queried whether there was any distinction between Fascism and 'Hailesel-lasieism', as the ultimate objective of both was absolute power. He mocked the so-called tolerance of the emperor, castigating him for hanging the dead bodies of the coup leaders. He summed up the reason for his resignation in one word: injustice (Berhanu Denqe n.d.). That was not his last word. On the occasion of the emperor's 1969 visit to the US, he wrote what he said was an appeal to the emperor, urging him to relinquish the outmoded divine right of kings, revise the constitution along democratic lines, permit

political parties and accept the principle of a popularly elected government.¹³

Ethno-nationalist discontent and the Eritrean insurgency

The imperial regime also faced challenge of a different order from ethno-nationalist movements, sometimes intertwined with peasant protests, and the Eritrean armed struggle that started in 1961. Apart from severely testing the regime, these movements endured after the revolution in one form or another to present a formidable challenge to the Darg regime and define the political contours of post-Darg Ethiopia. As we shall see below, the Eritrean insurgency was to play a particularly influential role in the origins and evolution of what came to be known as the national question in the Ethiopian student movement.

The first expression of ethno-nationalism actually belongs to the immediate aftermath of the Liberation. This was what has come to be known as the Wayane rebellion, which erupted in Tigray province in May 1943. It was an amalgam of peasant unrest and gentry discontent and arose from a combination of factors: the general insecurity that was prevalent in the early 1940s, administrative inefficiency and corruption, the rapacity of the Territorial Army, latent frustration at the marginalization of a once central province, and dissatisfaction at what amounted to detention in Addis Ababa of their hereditary leader, *Ras* Seyoum Mengesha, whose flirting with the Italians in the final years of the Occupation had made him rather suspect in the eyes of the central government. Led by the charismatic *Blatta* Hayle Maryam Redda, who gave the popular grievances a millenarian dimension, the rebels managed to capture a string of towns, including the capital, Maqale. Their success was short-lived, however. Unable to withstand a barrage of artillery fire by the government forces led by the veteran of the Resistance, *Ras* Abbebe Aregay, and heavy air bombardment by the government's British allies, the rebels surrendered in October 1943 (Gebru 1991: 89–124). But the rebellion was to have enduring significance by helping inspire what has come to be known as the Second Wayane, the armed struggle that was initiated by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in 1975 and finally brought the TPLF-spearheaded Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) to power in 1991.

Oromo ethno-nationalism expressed itself in two ways, both in the 1960s. The first was through the initially innocuous-sounding Mecha and Tulama Self-Help Association, founded in January 1963. The Association set out with the rather modest objectives of opening schools

¹³ It is worthy of note that Berhanu has recently published a booklet entitled *Qesar-na Abyot* ('Caesar and Revolution') which is tantamount to a recantation of his political stand of the 1960s. The author does not bother to explain the factors that brought about this volte face. One would suspect that, like so many Ethiopians, after the turbulent experience of the revolutionary years, he had grown nostalgic for the emperor's rule. Indeed, the first words in his Introduction are intended to disabuse the reader of any illusions from the title that the booklet was intended to vilify the emperor and glorify the revolution.

and building roads and clinics in the Oromo-inhabited areas. Although named after the two major branches of the Oromo nationality, it had in its membership some prominent personalities from other, mostly southern, nationalities as well. It was also in tune with the ethnic-based developmental associations that were mushrooming all over the country at the time, notably the Alamgana-Walayta Soddo Road-Building Organization among the Gurage. What led the regime to be apprehensive of the Oromo self-help association was the induction of the commander of the police, Brigadier General Taddese Berru, into its membership and his election as its president.

By November 1966, things had come to a head. Following the Association's implication in a plot to assassinate the emperor on the anniversary of his coronation and a bombing incident in a cinema hall in Addis Ababa, it was banned and the general was detained. Released by the Darg in 1974, he was executed by it on contrived charges of opposing the land reform proclamation. But the Association ultimately became the fountainhead for two successive Oromo liberation organizations: the Ethiopian National Liberation Front (ENLF), founded in 1971, and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), founded in 1976 (Olana 1985 EC; Bahru 2001: 261–2).

Interestingly enough, it was also in 1963 that a predominantly Oromo peasant rebellion broke out in the southeastern province of Bale. The rebellion was triggered by an amalgam of different factors: peasant discontent at the extortions they were subjected to by government officials, Muslim resentment of Christian domination and Oromo disgruntlement with a predominantly Amhara settler class. It started in the largely Somali-inhabited district of El Kere in the remote southeastern lowlands and was abetted by the irredentist agenda of the Somali government, which christened the movement the Western Somalia Liberation Front. It soon spread to the Oromo-inhabited highlands, however, accompanied by the emergence of Oromo leaders, such as the self-styled General Waqo Gutu. The rebellion lasted till 1970, pitting the Fourth Division of the Army under the command of General Jagema Kello and General Welde Sellassie Bereka. It was finally suppressed through massive military operations involving both regular troops and the local militia and combined with the ebbing of Somali support subsequent to the country's internal political crisis as a result of the 1969 military coup that brought General Siyad Barre to power (Gebru 1991: 125–59).

The Bale uprising was not the only peasant rebellion that the regime faced. There were sporadic outbreaks of such peasant protests in other parts of the country as well. Perhaps the most conspicuous of them was the one that broke out in Gojjam in 1968. Gojjam had a history of resistance to administrative control by the central government going back to the pre-war period. Even more concerted efforts to increase taxation and initiate a system of land classification precipitated a revolt in the early 1950s. The 1968 rebellion was triggered by the iniquitous

administration of the provincial governor, *Dajjazzmach* Tsehayu Enqwa Sellassie, and government efforts to implement the newly introduced agricultural income tax. The latter was particularly resented as a threat to the cherished system of hereditary land ownership (*rest*). The rebellion, which was centred in the districts of Mota and Daga Damot, was led by former leaders of the Resistance. The government tried to placate the rebels by transferring the governor to the western province of Kafa and declaring a general amnesty. When the rebels remained unimpressed by these concessions, the government launched a major military offensive combining regular troops and local militia and managed to suppress the rebellion. But the rebels were not total losers, as the new tax was abandoned and tax arrears of nearly two decades were waived (*ibid.*: 160–93).

But no revolt tested the imperial regime as much as the armed struggle that broke out in Eritrea in 1961. For much of the following decade and a half, it pitted the Army's Second Division, succeeding to kill its commander, Brigadier General Teshome Ergetu, in 1970 and generally sapping the morale of the troops. It contributed to the demise of the regime by radicalizing both the troops stationed in the province and the students who challenged the regime from the centre. The prominent role that the Second Division played in the military agitation of February 1974 emanated largely from the corrosion of its morale through the protracted military operations it had to wage against the Eritrean rebels. The pre-eminence that the 'national question' came to assume in the student movement also had to do largely with the need to take a principled stand on the Eritrean question. This can be seen very clearly from the resolutions on the national question adopted by various congresses of ESUE and ESUNA, which almost invariably had a specific addendum on the Eritrean question.

Much of highland Eritrea was part of the Eritrean polity until the Italians took advantage of the death of Emperor Yohannes IV (r. 1872–89) to occupy it and declare their colony of Eritrea in January 1890. The expulsion of the Italians from their recently acquired Italian East Africa, including Eritrea, in 1941, following a three-pronged military campaign by the British, threw the destiny of the former Italian colony into the open. Two competing forces, one calling for unconditional union with Ethiopia and the other campaigning for full independence, emerged inside the former Italian colony. Following the end of the Second World War in 1945, the victorious Four Powers held a succession of meetings to determine the ex-colony's future. Unable to come to an understanding because of the competing Eritrean claims and their own divergent strategic interests, they finally passed the buck to the UN in 1948. The UN set up a commission to gauge both Eritrean opinion and Ethiopia's interests and, taking into account the recommendation of the commission, resolved in 1950 to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia, and this came about in 1952 (Bahru 2001: 182–3).

Adopted as the golden mean between two extremes – union with

Ethiopia versus total independence – the federal formula was not destined to last. Apart from its own structural weaknesses, such as the fact that Eritrea was made part of the federation as a unit subservient to the Ethiopian crown rather than as an equal partner with Ethiopia, the absolutist regime in Ethiopia did not brook the political latitude that the federal formula envisaged. Abetted by the Eritrean Unionists, who had seen the entire federal arrangement as an imposition rather than a compromise, the Ethiopian government steadily eroded the autonomy that the federation had guaranteed to Eritrea. Finally, in November 1962, the Eritrean Assembly signed its own death warrant by voting to end the federal arrangement and uniting Eritrea with Ethiopia (*ibid.*: 219). Eritrea thus became the fourteenth province of Ethiopia.

Already in 1961, a force calling itself the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF, more commonly known by its Arabic abbreviated name, *Jabha*), had opened armed struggle in the western lowlands of Eritrea. ELF superseded the relatively more pacific Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM), which had tried to reverse the erosion and eventual termination of Eritrean autonomy by diplomatic means, such as lobbying the UN. ELF mobilized support for its cause from Arab countries, notably Iraq and Syria, by portraying Eritrea as an Arab country and its struggle as part of the Arab struggle against US imperialism. But its predominantly Muslim base and rather sectarian perception of the struggle precipitated divisions within its ranks. This process of fission culminated in the emergence of a rival organization initially based in the southeastern part of Eritrea and known as the Eritrean Popular Liberation Forces (EPLF, or in its shortened Arabic rendering *Sha'biya*). The early 1970s thus came to be dominated by a veritable civil war as the two rival fronts vied for hegemony. This internecine war continued until EPLF emerged as the dominant force in 1981 (*ibid.*: 219–20).

SUMMING UP

The immediate post-1941 years saw little of the intellectual dynamism of the pre-1935 period, particularly of the 1920s. Critical debate had given way to reverence for authority. In a way, the process could be said to have started in the five years between the coronation of Emperor Haile Sellassie in 1930 and the Italian invasion of 1935. But, the incipient personality cult that began to grow around him attained high levels in the post-1941 period, systematically drummed up by the media and pervading the entire educational system. The veneration of the emperor attained such a high level that, when the reaction against it came in the late 1960s, it had an iconoclastic character about it. A man who had assumed the status of a demi-god came to be reviled and ridiculed in the most unsparing fashion.

70 Not even the accomplishments of the imperial regime – and these

were not slight – could mellow down the strident opposition. The emperor was able to pursue and consummate a policy of unprecedented political and fiscal centralization. While this had its negative side in the erosion of local and traditional autonomy, it nonetheless strengthened the sinews and resources of the modern state. A series of five-year development plans were introduced to chart the country's planned development. Most striking were the developments in the sphere of infrastructure – through the laying of a nation-wide road network, the expansion of telecommunication facilities and, above all, the establishment and promotion of Ethiopian Airlines, destined to become one of Africa's most successful airlines.

In the cultural sphere, as well, the post-1941 period saw relative growth and sophistication compared to the pre-1935 period. Beginning with the didactic novels of Makonnen Endalkachaw, Amharic literature attained its peak with the publication of Haddis Alemayehu's *Feger eska Maqaber*, as much a landmark event, if not more so, as the publication of the first Amharic novel, *Toby*, by Afawarq Gebre Yesus in 1908. Kebede Mika'el's standard-setting poems also eventually gave way to the initially heterodox but eventually captivating style of Tsegaye Gebre Medhin, who also grew to become Ethiopia's most accomplished playwright. Modern and modernist art also flourished, attaining their peak in the works of Gebre Kristos Desta and Skunder Boghossian. The social satire of the *Addis Reporter* was matched by the more explicitly political novels of Abbe Gubegna. Modern music also grew, notably through the bands that accompanied the evolution of the modern military, particularly the highly popular Imperial Bodyguard Orchestra, some of whose lyrics were interpreted as expressing growing disenchantment with the imperial order.

The veiled – and sometimes not so veiled – critique of the regime in the literary and artistic spheres was accompanied by more overt expressions of political discontent. Initially, these expressions of political opposition were spearheaded by veterans of the Resistance (against the Fascist Italian occupation of 1936–41), such as *Dajjach* Belay Zeleke, *Bitwaddad* Negash Bezabih and *Blatta* Takkele Welde Hawaryat. The protracted duel with the emperor of the last-mentioned was to leave a particularly deep imprint on the student protests of the 1960s, to the point of his name being coupled with that of the slain student leader, Tilahun Gizaw, to serve as a pseudonym (Tilahun Takele) for the author(s) of the most potent tract on the national question. But, undoubtedly the greatest challenge to the imperial order came with the abortive coup of 1960 which, despite its suppression, opened a new chapter of militant opposition to the regime and served as an important backdrop to the radicalization of the Ethiopian student movement.

In the Beginning: ‘That Will Be the Day, When . . .’

*Students can write on any topic under the sun,
except on politics and religion¹*

THE INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

Secondary education is a post-1941 phenomenon in Ethiopia. It started with the founding in 1943 of the first secondary school, Haile Sellasie I Secondary School; in popular parlance, it became more famously known as Kotebe, after the locality in the eastern outskirts of Addis Ababa where it was situated. It was followed three years later by another school in the diametrically opposite western outskirts of the capital: General Wingate Secondary School, named after the charismatic British commander who led the British campaign of liberation in 1940–41 and went on to be a legend in the British Burma campaign. In other cases, elementary schools expanded to include secondary education. Such was the case with Tafari Makonnen School, already established in 1925. It was the Jesuit administrators of TMS (as it was more popularly known) who were deployed to establish the first institution of higher education in Ethiopia, the University College of Addis Ababa (UCAA). The person who was in the forefront of this undertaking was Dr Lucien Matte, director of TMS, who was asked by Emperor Haile Sellasie in January 1950 to start the college. The institution was initially intended to bear the name Trinity College – probably in an attempt to emulate the Cambridge institution of that name. Classes started about a year later, on 11 December, and the College was officially inaugurated on 3 March 1951 (24 Yakatit 1943). But its gazetted charter had to wait until July 1954 (Aklilu: 25–26; Micael Fassil: 5–6; Bahru 2001: 221).

The emperor appeared to have had a premonition of the destructive force that he was unleashing in opening this first institution of higher education. In his inaugural speech, after expressing his joy at the realization of his long-standing dream, he gave the following somewhat veiled warning to the students:

¹ Adapted from editorial call for contributions of *University College Calls* (UCC, 1: 3).

በአንዳንድ ትምህርት ቤት አልፎ አልፎ ሐሜት ይሰማል፡፡ ይህን ከምንዘረዝር ታውቁታላችሁና በየበኩላችሁ ያላችሁ ተማሪዎች ሁሉ ልትጠነቀቁበት ትችላላችሁ፡፡ ይኸውም በሐረር ተማሪ ቤት የሆነውን ነው፡፡

ሕግና ፍርድ እውነተኛ ሚዛን ናቸውና ከቀጡዋችሁ በኋላ ብትጸጸቱ የማይመለስ ጉዳት ነው፡፡

Rumours circulate in some schools. We do not have to go into the details; you all know it. We are of course referring to what happened at the Harar school.² So take heed. Law and justice will have to prevail. There is no point in expressing regret after you have been punished. (AZ, 24.6.43/3.3.51)

The College was designed essentially as a liberal arts one. There were no science degree graduates until 1957. As late as 1960, there was only one science graduate, compared to forty-six in Arts. Another feature was the predominance of expatriate staff. The student population grew from seventy-five in 1951/52 academic year to 439 in 1960/61, on the eve of UCAA's elevation to Haile Sellasie I University (HSIU). As mentioned earlier, there was no Ethiopian staff member until 1955. But, there appeared, however, to have been a conscious attempt to inject Ethiopian material into the curricula, with the number of courses dealing with Ethiopia growing over the years. An important dimension of this concern was the establishment of what came to be known as the Ethiopian Collection in the College Library (Aklilu, *UCR*: 27–31). It was this collection that eventually became the library of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) when it was established in 1963. Likewise, the small museum of UCAA was eventually transferred to the IES and developed into the other important component of its collection.

Exactly a decade after the founding of UCAA, the emperor began to think about elevating it to a university. By this time, a number of other colleges had been opened both inside and outside Addis Ababa: the Engineering College and the Building College (both in Addis), the Alemaya College of Agriculture (Harar) and the Public Health College in Gondar. The idea therefore was to bring together these various colleges within one higher education institution. To that end, a seven-man team from the University of Utah was assigned the task of preparing the ground work. The new university, inevitably named after the emperor like so many other institutions in the country, was formally inaugurated on 18 December 1961 at a special convocation held at the former Gannata Le'ul palace, which the emperor had donated to serve as the main campus of the new institution. The student paper, *News and Views*, hailed the event as 'a milestone in our history'. Students organized a big party for 1300–1500 guests in honour of the convocation. One of the future leaders of the Ethiopian Students

² It is not exactly clear what the emperor was referring to here, unless to what came to be known as the Qullub movement that rocked the Harar region in 1948. This was a movement led by Harari Muslim leaders for greater autonomy and was apparently inspired by the Somali Youth League, which was agitating for the independence of the Italian ex-colony of Somaliland along with the Somali-inhabited Ogaden region of Ethiopia. It had resulted in the detention of many of the leaders and the exile of others. See Carmichael 2001: 216–26.

Union in North America (ESUNA), Melesse Ayalew, wrote a piece entitled 'A Memorable Event', describing the occasion as 'a great leap forward in Ethiopia's struggle to enlighten its children through the highest forms of education' (N&V, V: 13).

The only jarring note in the generally celebratory mood, but a portent of things to come, was the critical speech delivered by the president of the National Union of Ethiopian Students (NUES), Mulu Bezabeh. Apprehensive of an untoward development, the university's business vice-president, Ato Wubeshat Delnesahu, had asked the NUES president to send him the text of his speech in advance. But what the president read was another more critical one that he had kept up his sleeve, contrasting Ethiopia's backwardness with the progress being registered by other African states (Bahru 2010: 45–46). This was very much the refrain of the official pronouncements of the coup-makers of 1960 and the emperor could hardly have been amused by this reminder of the most serious challenge to his rule to date.

The transition from UCAA to HSIU was far from smooth in other respects as well. Students resented in particular two developments that accompanied the birth of HSIU: the increasing Americanization of the educational system and the 'expropriation', as they put it, of some of the cherished institutions of UCAA. Interestingly enough, students aired their grievances by using pen-names, such as 'Tayaqiw' ('the Inquirer'), 'Yagabaw Tamari' ('the student who has understood'), and 'Yazanaw Tamari' ('the aggrieved student'). Two Americanisms that were particularly resented were the multiple-choice examinations and the requirement of registering each semester (N&V, VI: 15). This Americanization of the educational system is something that is emphatically conveyed by the Jesuit informants of Paulos Milkias as well (2006: 85–93).

A second cause of distress was the transfer of the Ethiopian collection and the museum to the largely under-populated main campus of HSIU. 'Tayaqiw' put it graphically when he queried:

Should HSIU destroy or pull down U.C. before it replaces it? Should HSIU rob us of the Museum we built up? Should it oblige students studying at U.C. to walk all the way to HSIU central compound if they want to refer to a book? Is it necessary that Haile Selassie I University build up its own library? Who is there in the central compound to read these books? Do you mean all books on Ethiopia are meant for decoration and not to allow Ethiopian students to know themselves and their country? (N&V, VI: 14)

Popular satirical columns of the student paper also highlighted this feeling of disenchantment. The 'Say it with Flowers' column, appearing in January 1963, emphasized that no one was keen to celebrate the anniversary of HSIU because of disgruntlement at the semester registration rule and the loss of the Ethiopian Collection and the Museum. The other vintage satirical column, 'That will be the day . . .' had this to say: 'That will be the day when . . . Haile Selassie I University abandons its policy of

expropriation'. 'Yagabaw Tamari' had a neat explanation for the policy of 'expropriation': as there was nothing worth seeing at the main campus, 'the best solution that our keen HSIU officials found was to loot the treasures of UCAA, store it in a room so that Ras Makonnen Hall can assume the appearance of an old institution of higher learning dating back to the 12th and 13th Centuries' (*N&V*, VI: 15).

But the second anniversary of HSIU was not all doom and gloom. A notable development of early 1963 was the decision of the Faculty Council to disaggregate the thitherto composite departments and faculties, thereby helping the emergence of units dedicated to the standard disciplines. This led to the creation of four departments within the Faculty of Education (Elementary, Secondary, Educational Administration and Psychology), and the departments of Economics, English, Ethiopian Languages, Geography, History, Philosophy, Political Science, Psychology and Sociology in the Faculty of Arts. Most of the departments in the Faculty of Arts had previously been merged within the Department of Social and Political Sciences. It was also at that meeting that it was decided to set up the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, whose library and museum were to be the cause for so much of the student lamentation above. Little did the students foresee the national treasure that the institute was to become in the ensuing decades.

STUDENT UNIONS AT HOME

The quest for a body that would serve as a collective voice did not come until towards the end of the 1950s.³ Known initially as the University College of Addis Ababa Student Council, it remained for long under the close tutelage of the dean of students. Its main objective was the co-ordination of what were known as extra-curricular activities. The Jesuit authoritarian stamp on campus life was reflected in the close monitoring of student extra-curricular activities as well. The first sign of open discontent at this tutelage manifested itself in a letter of January 1960 – a move that was disowned by some of the students, who were apprehensive of the implications of challenging the powers that be. It was probably in an attempt to placate such expressions of discontent that the Jesuit dean of students was replaced by the British Richard Greenfield, with Girma Amare as assistant dean. Nonetheless, the imperial message conveyed to the new dean by the president of UCAA, Dr Matte, was unambiguous about the continuing need for control. His brief, Greenfield was told, was to teach the students three things: 'discipline, discipline, discipline' (Balsvik 1985: 82–85).

Leading the student council was the executive committee consisting of the president, the secretary-general, the treasurer, the president of cultural activities, and the president of sports. In a rather inflated analogy to the powerful members of the UN Security Council, these office-bearers

³ Although Balsvik asserts that this came into being in the first year of UCAA (1985: 82), her very useful list of office-bearers in the Appendix does not commence before Academic Year 1958/59.

were known as the 'Big Five'. As of the beginning of the academic year 1961/62, the student council also came to be known as the University College Union (UCU) (*N&V*, V: 7). The first office-bearers of the student union for whom we have a record officiated in the academic year 1958/59: Hagos Gebre Yesus (president) and Asfaw Damte (secretary-general). Also serving as editors in the same year were Berhanu Waqwaya and Negussay Ayele (for *University College of Addis Ababa Newsletter*, predecessor of *News and Views*) and Amde Michael Habte (the first Editor of *News and Views*) (Balsvik 1985: 317). The year 1959/60 saw the election of the first African scholarship student, the Kenyan Omogi Caleb, to the post of secretary-general. But it was the 'Big Five' of the following two academic years (1960/61 and 1961/62) – led by two charismatic student leaders, Teshome Habte Gabriel and Gebeyehu Ferissa, successively – who were to witness some of the most dramatic events in the early history of the student movement. The first had to cope with the 1960 coup and the second paid the price for a dramatic confrontation with the imperial court on the issue of the 1962 College Day. Of these developments, more below.

The idea of bringing together the different college unions and associations under one national organization also first emerged in the late 1950s. On his return from an international gathering in Peru in early 1959, Hagos Gebre Yesus, the president of UCU, started exploring ways of setting up an 'Ethiopian Student Union' (*UCAAN* II: 25). This was followed by a meeting on 4 June of the presidents of the five college unions (Alemaya, Gondar, UCAA, Building and Engineering). The result was the setting up in the following year of the National Union of Ethiopian Students (NUES), with Mulugeta Bezabeh of Alemaya as the first president, and Tadesse Tamrat, Shibru Seifu, and Ba'alu Girma, all of UCAA, as vice-president, secretary-general and treasurer, respectively. In 1963, the union was forced to change its name to conform to its mandate of higher education institutions; thence, it came to be called the National Union of Ethiopian University Students (NUEUS). This change of name did not go without some opposition: the incumbent president, Teshome Mulat, had to explain why the leadership had to acquiesce in the new appellation. Sticking to the old nomenclature, he responded, would have required recognition by the state and registration with the state authorities, whereas restricting the mandate to university students would require recognition only by the university, which was the easier option (*N&V*, VII: 20).

This was far from convincing to some of the sceptics. One of these, Selamu Bekele, put it in the starkest of terms when he wrote:

When two roads were given us to take, one road of independence, National Union of Ethiopian Students, and a second road of dependence, National Union of Ethiopian University Students, we have chosen the second road, that road into dependence. When we were told to be free and responsible we have committed ourselves willingly to shackles of domination and immaturity. (*N&V*, VII: 21)

More serious was the criticism generally levelled against NUEUS that it was largely ineffectual. Other than the record of attending international conferences by members of its executive committee, there was little to show for the years of its existence. One critic, Girma Tadesse, went to the extent of posing the question: 'Does NUEUS Deserve to Exist?' He concluded: 'No one instance can be cited where the NUEUS carried a job commensurate with the combined student force of the Ethiopian University Students that would dwarf or even compare with the achievements of other and earlier independent college unions' (*N&V*, XI: 4).

Parallel with the evolution of student organizations went the publication of student papers. As a matter of fact, the striving to air one's views seems to have antedated the quest to organize. As early as 1952, i.e. only a year after the founding of UCAA, three students – Fiammetta Kaypaghean, Ayalew Zelleke and Belatchew Asrat – spearheaded a one-page fortnightly dubbed *Writers' Club*. But this did not last more than a year (*UCJ*, 1). This was followed by *University College Calls* in 1956/57. The paper had the modest objective of announcing the best shows in town and students were encouraged 'to contribute humorous quotations, caricatures, and proverbs' and to 'write on any topic under the sun, *except on politics and religion*' (*UCC*, 3; emphasis added). Such encouragements notwithstanding, the dearth of contributions by students became a constant problem and the weekly paper had to change into a fortnightly one. Only the tireless dedication of its editor, Asfaw Damte, kept the paper alive for even a year. In one of the issues, the editor had to write not only the editorial but also all the six pieces in it (*UCC*, 13)!

UC Calls thus gave way to the *UCAA Newsletter*, which had a slightly better fortune, running from 1957 to 1959. It started as a one-page affair, featuring in its columns short notices, including condolences, sports reports and news of UCAA alumni. There was no indication of its publisher until the sixteenth issue, when the 'Students' Council Office of Publicity' claimed responsibility. That issue included a studious reporting of the condition of Dr Matte, who had flown to Canada for medical check-up. Its matter-of-fact style of reporting provoked some criticism of being 'too formal, too dry, and it gives the impression of being written only for people outside UCAA' (*UCAAN* II: 6). This style was probably what triggered the appearance of the radical paper published by the Kenyan activist student Omogi Caleb and known as the *Campus Star*, which *UCAA Newsletter* itself described as 'a completely independent paper – independent in authority and responsibility' (*UCAAN* II: 21). Somewhat apologetically, it tried to defend its own cautious approach to campus affairs by arguing that:

The fact that the Newsletter has deliberately adopted a policy of not indulging in matters of politics, religion, or race does not mean that it cannot render a valuable service to the College Community. The Publication will continue therefore its modest task of reporting events that may be of interest to the College community and to the Alumni. (*UCAAN* II: 22)

The most famous and enduring student paper of the home-based student movement, *News and Views*, was intended to fill this conspicuous absence of *views* in the Newsletter. The editorial in the first issue of the newspaper, which came out on 9 October 1959, underscored the failure of the *Newsletter* to provide a forum for 'the expression of one's thoughts or ideas' (UCAAN II: 27). But the formal transition from one paper to the other was almost imperceptible. In fact, *News and Views* begins with Volume III of *UCAA Newsletter*. Although the first issue of *News and Views* bore that name, it described itself as 'the Newsletter'. The announcement of the change of name came only in the second issue, which actually had no 'Views' section for lack of contributions. The fifth issue of the paper lamented the fact that, in the absence of contributions, it would be difficult to continue (N&V, III: 2, 5). Not much seems to have improved by the end of the academic year, when the paper's editorial (written by Ahmed Sayed Ali), admitted that it had been little more than an 'official communiqué'. It went on to add that 'students here in the College are very discreet about expressing their views, if, of course, they have any views to express'. In such a situation, it argued, lamentation about the lack of freedom of the press can only be described as 'notoriously nonsensical' because:

those for whom it is claimed show every tendency to repel it. In fact the championing of such a cause may legitimately be interpreted as an infringement of the essential human right of freedom of choice. . . . In conclusion, I would like to say that the freedom of the press presupposes, in the first place the existence of a press. There can be no press without writing. (N&V, III: 31)

Things began to improve somewhat in the following academic years, with a higher degree of professional management by students of the journalism class advised by their professor. Yohannes Kifle and Ba'alu Girma served as editors, assisted by a team of nine, of which six were female. They were followed by Mogus Tekle Mikael and Fikre Merid. But it was an indication of the continuing ambivalence of the student population that the pros and cons of press freedom became the subject of a highly attended public debate in November 1960; the ayes won it by the narrow margin of 39 to 33 (N&V, IV: 7). An important innovation of early 1961 was the introduction of the 'That Will Be the Day, When . . .' column, featuring satirical wish sentences on various aspects of campus life (N&V, IV: 13).

In this as in so many other contributions, anonymity was to be a distinctive feature of student publications, with the adoption of such pen-names as 'Tamar iw' ('the Student'), 'Lelaw Tamari' ('the other Student'), 'Tayaqiw' ('the Enquirer'), etc. The penchant for anonymity did not go unchallenged, interestingly enough including in the 'That Will Be the Day' column itself. An issue of April 1963 carried the following: 'That will be the day when students are brave enough to let their names appear in *News and Views* under their contributions' (N&V, VI: 21). Another contributor, Meressa T.M., elaborated on this even further:

A contribution, based on criticism, without the name of its producer, gives undue shelter to the writer who is not able to stand by his principle, but to retreat for a cause which he will not defend himself. Such a shelter certainly provides him with an ambush in which he prepares himself for causing an unexpected damage, will keep him safe from public criticism that will be directed to him and will give him an opportunity to preach a wrong doctrine. (*ibid.*)

However, the use of pseudonyms was to be a common feature of student activism in Ethiopia, particularly in the 1970s, as the struggle both within the ranks of the student movement and with the imperial regime intensified. The authors of the two major tracts on the national question – Tilahun Takele and Tumtu Lencho – inevitably come to mind. Ethiopian Students Union in Europe (ESUE) publications also abound in pseudonyms. Indeed, it can be said that authors writing in ESUE publications tended to use pen-names much more than those writing in ESUNA ones. Pseudonyms became the norm after students made the transition from political to armed struggle, as in the case of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and Tigray People's Liberation Front, as can readily be seen from the names of most of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front leaders even today. Even outside the realm of armed struggle, the intense ideological debates between EPRP and *Ma'ison* in the spring of 1976 in the columns of *Addis Zaman's* 'Abyotawi Madrak' – in retrospect a dress rehearsal for the mutual extermination campaign of late 1976 – were carried on by authors using pen-names.⁴

Another serious preoccupation, particularly in the years 1961–64, was the status of the paper vis-à-vis the student union, the faculty advisor and the university administration. The issue of whether the paper was to continue as an autonomous undertaking or to be controlled by the student union appears to have been resolved by a referendum in December 1961, when it was decided to place the paper under a board chaired by the press & information officer of UCU (*N&V*, V: 13). But the paper continued to have troubled relations with the university-designated advisor and the university administration itself. Contributing to this was the perception in some circles that the paper had gone 'socialist' and that it was financially dependent on the university administration. With regard to the former, a Mr Cordasco, 'Student Advisor at the Business School', had reportedly entertained in late 1963 the idea of not only banning *News and Views* but also closing down UCAA (*N&V*, VIII: 2). This provoked a spirited defence of the paper and the college by Yonas Admasu and Gebre Mariam Beyene (*N&V*, VIII: 4).

The university administration couched its reservations about the perceived radicalism of *News and Views* in more subtle language by expressing its preference to channel its financial subsidies into a university-wide paper rather than different college papers. The simmering tension between the editors and the faculty advisor came to a head when the latter

⁴ Some of the more famous ones were: Hamacho Mahogano, Ewnetu Feleqe, Gurde Hundessa, Marta Walelign, Bezabeh Belachew.

submitted in late 1964 his letter of resignation on the grounds that the 'last issue contained much I advised against' and that he would not like to be associated with a paper where 'the President of the University ... [is] deliberately insulted' (*N&V*, XI: 4, 5). It was only in early 1965 that the paper finally emerged from this period of tension and launched its second series of circulation. An interesting feature of the early issues of the second series was the high number of Eritrean students in the editorial board.

Side by side with the college union, professional associations also came to be formed. Among the first of these was the University College Education Students Association (UCESA), which was established in 1959. The Association's statute stipulated three tiers of membership: full (for current education students), associate (graduates of the faculty) and honorary (for faculty members). It was engaged in a host of professional as well as community activities, such as participating in the Education Conference held at HSIU in May 1962, publishing the UCESA journal, organizing panel discussions, building a public library in the town of Dabra Berhan, some one hundred kilometres northeast of the capital, and securing summer jobs for needy students (*N&V*, VI: 5). UCESA was followed by the Association of Economics Students, Geography Society and Public Administration Students Association in early 1963 and History Society and the Political Science Association in subsequent years (*N&V*, VI: 13, 16, 17).

Posing greater challenge to the UCAA student union was the formation of a separate organization by Business College students. In that sense, Mr Cordasco's hostile remarks regarding *News and Views* and UCAA were a foreboding of the troubled relations to come. The problem started when the Department of Commerce was moved from Arat Kilo to the main campus at Seddest Kilo in the autumn of 1963. The move was accompanied by the upgrading of the department to the College of Business Administration, with a strong American stamp on both its faculty and curricula. The formation of its own independent union, the College of Business Administration Union (CBAU), and paper, *Busi-Body*, formed the setting for the impending confrontation. The decidedly apolitical style of the Business students' paper was seen by the UC students as a deliberate strategy of the American faculty to undermine student militancy. The vitriolic exchanges that ensued between the two unions formed the background to the bitter struggle between the Main Campus Student Union (MCSU), which was formed after the faculties of Arts and Education were relocated to the main campus at the beginning of the 1965/66 academic year, and the CBAU (Balsvik 1985: 122-3).

'Extra-curricular activities'

In the early UCAA days, students had few doubts as to the main purpose of their sojourn in the higher education institution. It was to excel in their academic work, thereby enhancing their job prospects and scholarship opportunities if they wished to pursue further higher education (OR:⁵ 11). But, the leisure and collective life of the campus induced

⁵ OR – Oral Report, throughout.

engagement in what came to be known as 'extra-curricular activities'. The very composition of the student council, with two of the officers designated as 'Presidents' of sports and cultural activities, underscored this reality. The two venerable institutions of the UCAA campus – the cafeteria and the sports ground – were to be the focal points of these activities, the first for the cultural and political and the second for the sports as well as the multi-purpose College Day.

As a result, life on campus was rich in cultural life and extra-curricular engagement. The objective, explicit or implicit, was to produce the all-round personality – the agile athlete, the eloquent orator, the incisive debater, the accomplished poet and the inspiring leader. In comparison with the more militant phase that student activity assumed after the mid-1960s, these early days could be characterized as 'The Age of Enlightenment'. It was a time when, more than changing society, students were interested in understanding it and in forming themselves into good citizens. Satire and social critique, more than frontal assault on the political order, was the norm.

Of the cultural engagements broadly defined, debating was the one activity that initially proved to be the most popular, followed by oratorical contests and panel discussions. Among the first debates on record was the one that took place in March 1958 on the topic: 'Who is doing more for the country: the Peasant or the School-trained?' (*UCAAN* I: 17). The report on the debate cheerfully recorded that the proponents of the scholar 'in the line of the Schoolman's tradition . . . were a little sublime and oratorical . . . , while the champions of the peasantry were, like the peasant, down to earth and practical' (*ibid.*: 18). The year 1959 saw the introduction of weekly debates in both English and Amharic. One such debate in November was on the motion: 'That this house considers the British system of education superior to the American system' (*N&V*, III: 5). Some of the topics were indicative of the issues that preoccupied the campus community, such as political engagement and the authoritarian nature of the Jesuit administration of UCAA. Examples of such topics included: 'Should students participate in national and international politics?' and 'College regulations are intolerable limitations on the rights of students' (*N&V*, III: 15, 21).

What was interesting about these debates was that both students and faculty were involved. The panel discussions went even further and involved government officials. At one such event in December 1959, the panellists were the minister of foreign affairs, Ketema Yifru, the minister of public health, Abbebe Retta, and the minister of education, Endalkachew Makonnen. The event, however, led to some acrimonious correspondence between James Odaga, a Kenyan scholarship student, and Samuel Alemayehu, the president of the Debating Society, and the resignation of another Kenyan student, Robert Ouko, the organizer of the English debates. Samuel had reportedly invited speakers from outside campus as he deemed college students 'incapable of debating', an allegation that he strenuously contested as hearsay (*N&V*, III: 10, 11).

The emperor attended some of the Amharic oratorical contests and expressed his satisfaction (*UCAAN* I: 28). Balsvik refers to an annual

oratorical contest in Amharic held at the Haile Sellasie I Theatre in 1961 on the 'responsibilities and difficulties' of harmonizing tradition and modernization (Balsvik 1985: 103–4). In the early 1960s, the college union extended these oratorical contests to include high school students, thus paving the way for the first interaction between college and high school students. Among the most memorable ones of these contests was the one held in April 1964 on the topic 'Might is Right and that is what we see in everyday life'; it was won by Abdul Mejid Hussein of Harar Madhane Alam School (*N&V*, X: 21).

The culmination of extra-curricular activities, combining both the athletic and the 'cultural', was the College Day, an institution that found itself astride the early and the radical phase of student activism. The event, which generally took place towards the end of the academic year, started in the mid-1950s principally as a day of sport activities. Gradually, however, the poetry contest became its defining feature. The contest actually took place beforehand and it was only the winning three poems that were recited to the public on that day. The first such recital apparently took place in March 1959.⁶ The winning poem, by Tegegne Yeteshawork⁷, was on the rather innocuous theme of 'Man is a Riddle'. The emperor, who attended these annual events until the rupture in 1962 that we shall discuss below, gave prizes to the winners (generally a gold watch). The event was reported in detail in three issues of *Addis Zaman* (AZ, 30.6.51/9.3.59; 4.7.51/13.3.59; 5.7.51/14.3.59).⁸

The 1961 College Day was to change all this. The winning poem by Tamiru Feyissa, entitled 'Dehaw Yenagaral' ('The Poor Man Speaks Out') and depicting the miserable life of the poor, became an instant sensation among the public. The most potent part of the poem contrasted the poor man's starvation diet and his resignation to his fate:

ግማሽ ጋሬ እንጀራ እጎሰጉሰና
አንድ አቦሬ ውሀ እጃሽ አደርግና
ሣር እመደቤ ላይ እጎዘገዝና
ድረቶ ደርቤ እፈነደሰና
ተመስገን እላለሁ ኑሮ ተገኘና፡፡

Eating half *enjara*⁹ of the poorest quality,
Washing it down with a tumbler of water,
Strewing grass on my earthen bed,
I lie down with a tattered cloth for my blanket,
And praise God as if this was a life worth living!

⁶ There is some confusion in the numbering of college days, particularly in the reports in the Amharic daily, *Addis Zaman*, which seems to count them from the year of UCAA's establishment. But, cf. Ato Eyasuswork's reckoning in Bahru 2010: 25).

⁷ Tegegne subsequently had a rather controversial career as editor of the English daily, *Ethiopian Herald*, becoming particularly notorious for his condemnation of the 1966 student demonstration against the 'Shola Concentration Camp'. He was one of the sixty officials executed by the Darg in November 1974.

⁸ A number of the poems read on College Day were collected and published in a volume on the occasion of the AAU Golden Jubilee in 2000 (AAU Golden Jubilee 1993 EC).

⁹ Ethiopian bread (alternative rendering of *injera*).

There is no doubt that the poem marked a departure from the philosophical and existential musings of the earlier years. One could perhaps trace the change of tone, in the poem as in so many other aspects of campus life, to the awakening effect of the 1960 coup. According to Paulos, Tamiru was personally involved in the momentous event, as he was one of the students who went over to meet the leader of the coup, Brigadier General Mangestu Neway, in the early days of the coup, when the general described the officials that he had detained as 'a burden to the country and parasites sucking the blood of the Ethiopian society' (Paulos 2006: 102).¹⁰

News and Views commended the 1961 College Day, coinciding as it did with the 10th anniversary of UCAA, as the 'best ever'. Among other highlights of the event were: the presentation of a bouquet of flowers to the emperor by 'Miss University College Day', Luladay Mekasha, arriving 'on a float carried by a group of students in colourful costumes'; a miniature rocket that was launched by a group of enterprising science students but 'dropped on the carrier instead of flying into space'; and the award of the General Abboud trophy to Gebeyehu Ferissa, who had been selected as 'the best all-round student of the year' (*N&V*, IV: 28).

But the emperor was far from amused at what he heard. The unpleasant evocation of poverty by the winning poet came to be regarded as a breach of imperial protocol, with fateful consequences for the next College Day and beyond. The verbal tussle that preceded the 1962 College Day has been described in graphic detail by the vice-president of UCU at the time, Ato Eyesuswork Zafu (Bahru 2010: 25–27). In short, the officers of the union were summoned to the palace and asked to submit the poems to be recited for prior scrutiny by the palace if they wished His Imperial Majesty to grace the day with his presence. They would not be given another chance to invite him and 'heap abuses on him'. As was to be expected, the union was not prepared to subject its activities to such censorship; the emperor failed to attend the College Day for the first time since the tradition was initiated.

As it turned out, the fears of the palace were not entirely groundless. For the three poems recited on the 1962 College Day proved even more daring in their portrayal of the Ethiopian social and political reality. The winning poem,¹¹ by Yohannes Admasu, was probably the longest ever recited. Under the title of *Eski Tatayaqu!* ('May I Pose a Question to You?'), the poet, having despaired of getting an answer in this world, enquired of those inhabiting the world beyond the grave whether their society (too) was marked by political injustice and social inequity, whether its priesthood was characterized by ignorance and indolence, and its literature stifled by censorship; in short, whether there was such a thing as freedom (AAU Golden Jubilee 1993 EC: 24–43). The second poem, by Yilma Kebede, had the innocuous-sounding title, 'Life'. But its content

¹⁰ It is not very clear in what capacity Tamiru went to meet the general. Balsvik (1985: 94) mentions by name only Teshome Habte Gabriel and Shibru Seifu, president and secretary-general of the UCU, respectively.

¹¹ Balsvik (107–9) appears to have reversed the order in her list of winning poems, placing Yohannes Admasu third and Melaku Tegegn first. The contemporary report in *Addis Zaman* (4.10.54/11.6.62), however, places Yohannes first and Melaku third.

was no less critical than Tamiru Feyissa's. It talked of the arrogance and insolence of the rich. In many ways, it appears to have been a kind of sequel to or reinforcement of Tamiru's earlier poem. Not only does the word 'poor' or its derivatives occur more than a dozen times in the poem, but a key part of the poem is also an almost identical portrayal of the poor man's fatalistic acceptance of his lot:

ያንገቱ ማስገቢያ ጉጆ ከቀለሰ፤
መርዶፋ ተሰፍቶ ኮት ከተለበሰ፤
አሰሱን ገሰሱን ደህና አርጐ ካፈሰ፤
የቅንብቻው መሙሊያ ውሀ ከቸለሰ፤
በደረቅ አልጋው ላይ ከተፈነከረ፤
ይህ ለሱ ኑሮ ነው ከንቁዕ የከበረ፡፡ (*ibid.*: 44–50)

As long as he gets a hovel to sneak into at night,
Has on his back a jacket made of the coarsest material,
Gorges on any available crumbs,
Fills up his stomach with water,
And slumbers on his dry bed,
This for him is *life* more precious than jewel!

The Government's reaction to this continuing defiance was swift. Within a month of the observance of the College Day, it announced the abolition of the boarding system. The official reason given for this drastic step was that the measure was taken in order to use the funds thus saved to enrol more students (AZ, 26.10.54/3.7.62). That was also what the emperor claimed when a delegation of students went to the palace and presented a petition asking him to reverse the decision. He rebuked them for their self-centredness in the following rhetorical manner (AZ, 28.10.54/5.7.62):

ትምህርትን ለማዳረስ ቢጀመር ይህንን ለመንቀፍ ትችላላችሁን? እንኩንዋንስ ለእናንተ ለአባት ለእናታችሁም ጭምር የምናስበውን ለምን ታብላሹብናላችሁ? . . . የኢትዮጵያ ተማሪ አይብዛ ብላችሁ ስትከራከሩ ሕሊናችሁ አይወቅሳችሁም?

How dare you oppose Our effort to provide education to all? Don't you know that we care not only for you but also for your parents? How can you, in all conscience, oppose the increase in the number of students in Ethiopia?

But it is difficult to accept such explanations at face value. What makes them suspect is that the measure was accompanied by the suspension of the members of the executive committee of the student union and the three winning poets and the imposition of fines on the staff members who had served as judges (Balsvik 1985: 107–9). The vice-president, who was graduating that year, was also denied the honour of receiving his degree from the emperor at the convocation (Bahru 2010: 30–31). Moreover, by the admission of the university business vice-president himself, the new system of providing stipends to students for their meals and accommodation (while

the dormitories remained empty) was to prove more expensive, leading to the eventual, if partial, restoration of the boarding system (*N&V* 2nd series, I: 6; Balsvik, 32–33, 36, 109–10).

The students did not give up without a fight. As indicated above, a delegation went to the palace with a petition two days after the decision was announced. The exchanges that took place following the reading of the petition by Tadesse Tamrat, the student chosen for the purpose, have been narrated in fascinating detail by Eyesuswork Zafu (Bahru 2010: 28–29). After the petition was rejected in rather unequivocal terms, the students concentrated their attention throughout the academic year 1962/63 first on trying to have the decision reversed and, when that proved unlikely, on mitigating the injurious effects of the measure. This had two facets: devising a healthy and yet economical catering system and minimizing the risk of a lull in extra-curricular activity. Initially, the catering in the student cafeteria, where the students continued to eat with the allowance given them for the purpose, had been entrusted to Ras Hotel. The performance of the hotel was deemed highly unsatisfactory and the responsibility was successively transferred to the dean of students' office and the student union (*N&V*, VII: 21).

As the year progressed, there was a dramatic shift in student mood from defiance to pessimistic resignation. Thus, the *News and Views* editorial of October 1962 entitled 'Rally to the Call' had urged students to challenge the decision to abolish the boarding system and 'to rally to the call so that the torch of college life will burn again, and brighter than ever' (*N&V*, VI: 2). By contrast, an editorial in late April 1963 declared emphatically 'WE HAVE LOST THE GAME', summing up the failure of the efforts not only to reverse the decision on the boarding system but also the relocation of the Ethiopian Collection and the museum to the main campus of the newly established HSIU:

Now, the student no more bothers with social & political problems (local or international). Instead he has been given some other primitive worries to crack his mind. Now, the student is busy all the days of the month calculating his expenditure, so as to make his \$30 or \$50 last for a month . . . No wonder College life has lost its old vigour and lustre. No wonder all those dynamic speeches and poems have disappeared. We now live in a world of suspicion. We fear and suspect that we might say or do something that will still worsen our situation . . . The student has become very individualistic and his needs have become only material. We have become primitive. We have lost the game. (*N&V*, VII: 24)

But the College Day tradition – probably one of the most memorable in the history of UCAA – was maintained, and the poems continued to pour forth, even after the venue was transferred to the main campus at Seddest Kilo when the Faculties of Arts and Education moved there in the 1965/66 academic year. Among the most explicitly political in the subsequent years were: *Melasen Tawulegn* ('Spare My Tongue') by Abebe Worke (1966), 86 *Ityopyawiw Mannaw?* ('The Ethiopian, Who is He?') by Ibsa Gutema

(1966)¹² and *Barakata Margam* ('A Bounty of Curses') by Hailu Gebre Yohannes (1967).¹³

There is evidence that the government was also closely monitoring College Day activities as a gauge of student mood. Thus, a security agent who styled himself 'Aqrabiw' ('The Reporter') submitted a detailed report of the 1967 edition, describing the various posters and placards as well as the recital of the winning poems, particularly *Barakata Margam*, which had won first prize. He also recorded the high reception received by the political science journal, and particularly its annex on the Tanzanian socialist experiment known as *Ujamaa*. He emphasized the anti-American tone of the resolutions of the 6th NUEUS Congress that were distributed on the occasion, including expressions of solidarity with the struggle of the Vietnamese people, as well as reiterations of the 'Land to the Tiller' slogan and denunciations of police brutality. After noting the enthusiastic applause from the audience and the rush to buy journals and other publications, 'the reporter' concluded:

ስለዚህ ይህ ዓመታዊ በዓላቸው ሕዝቡን ከመንግሥት ጋር የሚያሸክሩበት፣ መንግሥቱን ከሌላው መንግሥት የሚያቀያይሙበት ሁነኛ የስሜታቸው መገለጫና ማከፋፈያ ተብሎ ቢገመት ትክክለኛ ነው፡፡ (IES CL 2402/1, 14.9.59/22.5.67)

Thus, it is fair to conclude that this annual festival of the students serves them as a convenient medium for the expression and dissemination of their views with a view to undermining public confidence in the government as well as pitting it against other governments.

Cultural activities

After the confrontation of 1962, there appears to be a perceptible emphasis on cultural activities. Evidence of this trend was the production of two dramatic performances: the first *Comedy of Love*, which toured the schools, and the second Tsegaye Gebre Medhin's English play, *Tewodros*. Another was the publication of an annual literary magazine in English called *Something*. This began in 1962 and continued until at least 1968 (*N&V*, VI: 10; VII: 26). Unusually for a student publication, *Something* proved a profitable business venture, registering a profit of Eth\$450 from the first issue alone, which was said to have been distributed to 'more than 70 universities and colleges throughout the world' (*N&V*, VIII:4). The magazine had also established exchange arrangements with literary journals outside the country, such as *Penpoint* of Makerere University in Uganda and a number of other journals in American universities. The fact that faculty were heavily involved at the outset might have had something to do with the success of the magazine. In early 1964, though, Eshetu Chole was elected as the first student editor of the magazine (*N&V*, X: 15). The lecturer William Prouty apparently played a leading role in it, contributing a number of incisive reviews of some Ethiopian literary works in English: Abe Gubegna's

¹² Erroneously dated as 1965 in AAU Golden Jubilee 1993 EC: 112.

¹³ See Balsvik (1985: 337–8) for a not-so-complete list of the poems from 1961–68.

Savage Girl, Mengistu Lemma's *Marriage by Abduction* and Sahle Sellassie's *Shinega's Village*. The fifth issue of *Something* (1 April 1966) was dedicated to the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, 'whose work is a challenge and an inspiration to all young African writers', with a review of his works by Rosaline Ike. An Amharic counterpart called *Endih Naw* ('That's how it is') also saw the light of day about this time, with Berhane Meskel Redda, who had already written passionately about the need for such a journal, as its first editor and three faculty members as 'Honorary Members' of the editorial board.

Another noteworthy undertaking of UCAA and later HSIU students was the setting up of an ethnological society to study the various traditions of the country's population. It was actually established in 1952, i.e. soon after the founding of UCAA, with Aklilu Habte, the future president of HSIU, serving as its first president (*N&V*, X: 7). On 22 June 1958, when it celebrated its 6th anniversary with a lavish dinner featuring mostly Ethiopian cuisine and *azmari* (the traditional minstrels), another future president of the university, Duri Mohammed, was at its head. The secretary of the Ethnological Society at the time, Akalou Wolde Mikael, reported that it had attained international stature, corresponding with 'big universities, sociological and anthropological institutions and famous ethnologists', while the president likened the Society's undertakings to initiating 'the renaissance of the country' (*UCAAN* I: 29). The abolition of the boarding system disrupted activities for a year, but the Society was reconstituted in 1963, with Gebru Tareke as president and Zer'u Kishen as secretary (*N&V*, X: 7).

The Society's greatest achievement was the regular publication of the *Ethnological Society Bulletin* over a period of some eight years. The range of topics and areas that featured in the Bulletin included food and drink, folktales, religion, ritual and ceremonies. The founding president, Aklilu Habte, contributed eighteen articles to various issues of the Bulletin. But perhaps the most notable was a nearly sixty-page-long article by Yusuf Ahmed entitled 'An enquiry into some aspects of the economy of Harar and the records of the household economy of the Amirs of Harar (1825–1875)', which appeared in 1960. The article was so well-researched that it was subsequently used by scholars working on Harar such as Richard Caulk and Volker Stitz.¹⁴ Other articles dealt with Ethiopian folklore stories, Harari funeral and wedding customs and reports of field trips to Zeqwala, Dabra Libanos, Managasha and Naqamte. The entire issue of Bulletin No. 6 (June 1957) was actually dedicated to the field trip to Naqamte, written by Abebe Ambatchew, Negga Tessema, Tilahun Paulos, Admassu Neguse and Mengesha Workineh. These bulletins were found so useful that the Department of Sociology and Social Administration of Addis Ababa University reprinted them in 2002, along with helpful author and subject indexes as well as a list of officers and members of the Society and contributors to the bulletins (Pankhurst 2002).¹⁵

¹⁴ Information kindly provided by Shiferaw Bekele.

¹⁵ The Department even tried to revive publication of the worthy journal but could not go beyond three issues (Information kindly supplied by Alula Pankhurst).

The Bulletin lifted the prevalent maxim of 'Know Thyself' a notch higher. For it was no mere airing of views or review of books. Even if as novices, students for the first time came to appreciate the need to build knowledge on field work. For a number of the articles that appeared in the Bulletin were the results of field observations. In this academic or scientific approach to the understanding of society, members of the Ethnological Society set a new pattern – pattern which unfortunately was given a back seat as the political heat intensified in the late 1960s. The set formulas and ostensibly universal rules of Marxism-Leninism were to take precedence over the laborious but ultimately more reliable gathering of empirical data.

What is also of interest about the various contributions to the Bulletin is the relative absence of ethnic barriers. While some of the reports were written by students originating from the area, most appear to have been written by non-natives. There was then the blissful belief that Ethiopia – and its parts – belong to all, irrespective of place of origin. This practice had its obvious limits. Those who speak the language of the local population and in other ways feel part of the society they are investigating are better equipped for the task. On the other hand, the Bulletin approach had the advantage of promoting cross-cultural understanding and interaction. Members of the Society also participated in the collection of cultural artefacts that constituted the core of what eventually became the Ethnological Museum of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies.

Messay Kebede, in his critical analysis of the student movement, argues that, unlike the situation in colonized countries such as India where 'modernization included the defense of their traditional identity, for young Ethiopians the eradication of the past became a condition for moving toward modernity' (Messay 2008: 139). The truth was much more complex. The experience of the Ethnological Society provides ample proof that, at least at the beginning, students were keen to understand their country and their society. In the religious sphere as well, initially, adherents of the Orthodox Christian faith actually sought to redefine their religious identity through an association that was founded in 1958. Known as Haymanota Abaw ('Faith of the Fathers'), the association was officially launched at the residence of the Ethiopian Archbishop (eventually the first patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church), *Abuna* Basilios, in the presence of *Ras Bitwaddad* Makonnen Endalkachew, the ex-prime minister, and other ministers and bishops (*UCAAN* I: 26). *Abuna* Tewoflos, future (second) patriarch and considered one of the most reform-minded members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, was honorary chairman while Akalewerq Habte Weld, the future minister of education, was its president (Haile Mariam 1997: 327). In 1959, Zewdineh Yimtatu was elected as vice-president and Tadesse Tamrat and Asfaw Damte as first and second secretary, respectively (*UCAAN* I: 19).

The main agenda of the association could be said to have been the reform of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, including the translation of its Ge'ez liturgy into Amharic to make it more accessible to the general public, and

arranging visits to some of the noted religious and monastic centres. It also organized public lectures. For instance, on the occasion of its fifth annual meeting in April 1963, President Kasa Wolde Mariam gave a talk on the topic 'The Church Needs the Youth'. In 1965, the association organized a lecture by Endalkachew Makonnen on the topic 'Is Christianity Irrelevant to Our Modern Way of Life'; it was reportedly attended by about one thousand students. But, as the radicalization process picked momentum among the university students, the association shifted its constituency to high school students.¹⁶ However, the failure of Patriarch Tewoflos to introduce the much-anticipated reform of the church, including fasting and feasting practices, blew the wind out of the Association, whose membership dwindled from around seven thousand in 1970 to about three thousand by 1974 (Haile Mariam 1997: 328–34).

When it comes to student pronouncements on the church and religion in general, it ranged from reformist utterances as late as 1965 to outright condemnation in the following years. Thus, in the March 1965 issue of *Challenge*, Belay Kassa, 'an adherent of that sect of Christianity' (as he styled himself), subjected the Orthodox Church to critique for its numerous holidays, prolonged fasting periods, expensive feasts, and large land holdings. At the same time, however, he enjoined 'Church and Crown' to 'work together to bring the inevitable religious reform in the country. Otherwise, the Church will not be able to accommodate the demands of the new generation and will be faced with the loss of a tremendous number of adherents' (*Challenge*, V: 1).

The radicals writing in *Struggle* (the organ of the University Students Union of Addis Ababa) after 1967 were less accommodating. Thus Berhane Meskel Redda, writing from his Ethiopian University Service (EUS) post in late 1967, reminds the British historian Edward Gibbon to rephrase his famous verdict on Ethiopia thus: 'Encompassed [on all sides] by the enemies of their religion *and lulled to deep slumber by their own religion*, the Aethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten' (*Struggle*, I: 3).¹⁷ He then proceeded to give him the ABC of historical materialism, the interplay of religion and politics and the new religious assault of foreign missionaries. It was perhaps this resentment of the intrusion of foreign missionaries, particularly in its Pentecostal version, that gave rise to the convergence of the radical students and the members of Haymanota Abaw in their antagonism to the Pentecostal movement (Haile Mariam 1997: 332). This author certainly recalls the many disruptive activities that militant students organized against the sites of Pentecostal worship. In early 1968, Yohannes Berhane cast the recurrent but ultimately futile call for religious reform in a more combative mode: 'If history calls a spade a spade, it would undoubtedly refer to religious institutions as the most conservative if not reactionary elements the world

¹⁶The suspension of all faith-based associations by the university in early 1968 might have also contributed to the decline of the influence of Haymanota Abaw among university students. See UR II: 16.

¹⁷ Berhane Meskel's insertion is indicated in italics.

has ever witnessed' (*Struggle*, II: 2). He then goes on to cite instances of the church making and unmaking kings (both in Ethiopia and Europe), the enormous land grants of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the innumerable religious holidays that sap the farmer's productivity (including four a month dedicated to Mary alone under different guises).

Community service

Paying back to the community that was bearing the cost of their education was something that motivated the students from the late 1950s on. As Balsvik has stated, it was the first expression of their social commitment (Balsvik 1985: 134). In the words of one of the students, Selamu Bekele: 'The tax-collector [i.e. the student] has been stripping the tax-payer [i.e. the peasant] to his bones . . . The time has come for us to choose between self aggrandisement [*sic*] and the welfare of our people, to prove whether we will be true to our people or betray them under the darkness of ignorance' (*N&V*, V: 3). Another student, Takkele Tadesse, who described himself as 'a humble messenger of the illiterate people of Ethiopia', even went to the extent of donating his own plot of land in Wolisso for the construction of a school and appealed for contributions from all students to realize the project (*N&V*, VIII: 4; X: 5).

These community services started with visits to the Entoto Community Center and the orphanage school in the Casanchis quarter of Addis Ababa but were later extended to conducting literacy classes and even building schools. The literacy classes were given at the Prince Makonnen School in the Mercato area of Addis Ababa and in what were called mobile schools for the rural population. Perhaps the most remarkable result of the school-building enterprise was the primary school that UCAA students built in Jimma or, more precisely, at Jiren (the historic centre of the Kingdom of Jimma Abba Jifar) in the summer of 1963 as part of a UCU summer project. The team leader, Getachew Ar'aya, recalls that the undertaking was inspired by the example of Operation Crossroads, a programme that sent American university students to build schools in Ethiopia during their vacation. The UCAA group raised about Eth\$4000 from students and staff for the purpose. They also got logistical support from the Ministry of Defence (Getachew reminiscences). Eight students were actively involved in the construction of the school, which was said to have cost Eth\$4000. Financial contributions were made by both Dean Aklilu Habte (Eth\$50) and Duri Mohammed in his capacity as treasurer of the UCAA Alumni Association (Eth\$100) (*N&V*, VII: 28, 30). One of the participants in the building of the school, Eshetu Chole, later recalled his involvement in the building of the school as 'one of my most gratifying experiences in the college' (*N&V* 2nd series, I: 6). But the Ministry of Education threatened to cut off aid for the running of the school if the name of the school – 'UCAA Primary School' – was not changed. The only concession it was prepared to make was to let the notice that the school was built by UCAA students stand.

Nor were these community-oriented undertakings confined to the 91

students of UCAA. Students of the Public Health College in Gondar also set up what they called Berhan Lahulu ('Light for All') Society in 1962 and conducted a highly successful literacy programme. Alemaya Agricultural College students opened a village school in 1957 known as the 'Aggies' School. It was to prove one of the most enduring of such student undertakings. As in the case of the Jimma School, there was some disagreement with the Ministry of Education, which tried to take over the school, presumably because it had been covering part of the expenses (Balsvik 1985: 137). Outside Ethiopia, Ethiopian Students Association in North America (ESANA) initiated a literacy campaign programme led by Ephraim Isaac, which was to raise substantial funds to assist the literacy campaign activities in Ethiopia. A March 1965 editorial of *Challenge* enjoined its members to make contributions by evoking a saying of the British philosopher Edmund Burke: 'All that is necessary for the forces of evil to triumph in the world is for enough good men to do nothing' (*Challenge*, V: 1). Quite a bit of the funds thus raised (Eth\$500 out of a total of Eth\$680) appeared to have found its way into the HSIU University Literacy Project (ULC) sponsored by the Education Students Association, which had reportedly mobilized some 300 volunteers to teach over 1700 students by early 1968 (*UR*, II: 19).

As Balsvik maintains, the Ethiopian University Service was a natural outgrowth of these community concerns of the students. Although it was subsequently 'hijacked' by the university administration, the initiative for a year of national service had come from the students. It all started with a proposal from NUEUS towards the end of 1963 for 'establishing a student National Service System'. The executive committee of UCU followed this up with the appointment of a committee to come up with pertinent recommendations. A joint meeting of the UCU committee and another committee composed of the dean of students and other faculty members was held on 27 December (*N&V*, X: 7).¹⁸ A *News and Views* editorial of the same date, while noting the general enthusiasm for the idea, reported the reservations expressed about 'sacrificing' a whole academic year and its restriction to HSIU students. The reservation about making a full year project came out in the very framing of a panel discussion on the subject that was organized at the same time: 'Should HSIU students be compelled to break their studies for National Service?' (*N&V*, X: 11).

Friction soon developed, however, between the students and the university administration as the latter took over the idea and began to push it as a mandatory requirement. The Faculty Council adopted the plan for a national service at its meeting of 17 April 1964. At that meeting, President Kasa Wolde Mariam informed the members of the council that its executive committee had actually resolved in February 1963 in favour of establishing the programme and appointed committees to suggest modalities for its implementation. The meeting then proceeded to a heated discussion of the

¹⁸ Paulos Milkias (2006: 117) recalls that the NUEUS meeting that recommended the national service plan actually took place as early as 1961. But there is so far no documentary evidence to support this.

statute of the programme drafted by one of the designated committees. Among the issues raised were: whether the programme should be mandatory or voluntary; whether it should be a university or national service and, if the former, what the fate of foreign students would be; whether the service should be confined to teaching or be made to include other fields by consulting ministries other than that of education; why students should be asked to do the service at the end of their third year rather than after their graduation; and whether it should also apply to diploma students or be confined only to degree ones. Opponents of the programme, led by Dr Abraham Demoz, while accepting in principle the idea of national service, objected to it being made a degree requirement and hence mandatory. The meeting was concluded with the adoption of the draft statute, with some amendments, including the change of name from 'National Service' to 'University Student Service'. A motion proposed by Ato Mesfin Wolde Mariam to delay implementation of the programme by one year was, however, defeated (IES 02402.01.4A, FC No. IV – 1963–64).

Students all along wanted the plan to remain voluntary and not the imposition it increasingly came to appear. In one issue of *News and Views* (5 March 1964), Eshetu Chole in fact wrote a piece entitled 'NATIONAL SERVICE: AN IMPOSITION', arguing that 'the idea of National Service holds something both less appealing and more destructive than one based on student initiation' (*N&V*, X: 16). About a month later, an editorial of the student paper wrote in the same vein:

We want to help our country because we realize it is our duty. What we do not like is to be dictated upon by outside pressure. The plan is originally ours and we shall go on implementing it successfully in our own way as we have been doing in the past. (*N&V*, X: 20)

A poll on the plan conducted by the executive committee of UCU came up with the following results: 251 students against, seventeen for and eighty-five for conditional acceptance.

A series of meetings were held between the university administration led by President Kasa Wolde Mariam and student representatives. On 15 April, the president had a meeting that lasted more than three and half hours with the executive committee of UCU. That was two days before the Faculty Council of the university made the programme a degree requirement, heralding its transition from national to university service. While the president rejected the idea that the programme was initially proposed by the students themselves, the student leaders challenged the line adopted by the administration that the programme was a degree requirement in view of the fact that African scholarship students were exempted from it. Nor were they particularly mollified by the suggestion that one year of university service will count for two years of the mandatory eight year government service that is required of them after graduation by virtue of the stipends they were paid over a four-year period. They argued, on the contrary, that they were not made aware of such a condition when they were paid stipends. They also made light of the administration's argument that the

programme will help them know rural Ethiopia, arguing that many of them came from the provinces and doubting 'how much can be learned about Ethiopia by going to one province only'. They even ventured the argument that the programme would disrupt the manpower training targets of the Second Five-Year Plan – to which President Kasa responded that 'plans were man-made and could be altered if need be' (N&V, X: 21).

In what some saw as a manoeuvre to divide the student body, the university administration also held separate meetings with leaders of the various professional associations. Such a meeting was indeed held on 16 April with officials of the Education Students Association, when the president combined the explanatory and the intimidatory in his responses to the queries of the student representatives. Asked why 3rd year students were chosen for the assignment, he responded that it was with the hope that they will 'come back with some helpful material for their essays and class discussions'.¹⁹ Nor, he argued, could the National Service be carried out during the summer recess as students had demanded because of communication difficulties during the rainy season. To allay the prevalent apprehension of favouritism in the implementation of the programme, he assured them that no students will be assigned in the capital, informing them at the same time that service students will be paid salaries ranging from Eth\$175–200 in proportion to the hardship character of their locations.²⁰ While he was prepared to answer their queries, he nonetheless warned them of 'strict and severe measures' if the plan was rejected (*ibid.*). In the end, the University had its way and the Ethiopian University Service, as it came to be known, was launched at the beginning of the academic year 1964/65 with 129 students participating. By 1970/71, the number had grown to 475 (Seyoum 1971: 42ff).

Two conclusions can be drawn from the above discussion of student involvement in community service. The first is the apprehension with which university and government authorities viewed student initiatives and the alacrity with which they appropriated such initiatives. Thus, the Ministry of Education was keen to avoid UCAA and Alemaya students getting too much of the limelight in the two schools that they founded. In the case of the university service, too, what the students had initiated as a voluntary programme to be undertaken in their spare time ended up being a university-run mandatory degree requirement. Ultimately, however, the EUS contributed to the radicalization of the students in ways that the university or government authorities had scarcely foreseen. Contrary to the assertions of the students, too, they did learn a lot about their country from their one year of sustained exposure. Moreover, the EUS forged an important link between university and high school students that was to pose a formidable challenge to the regime. This became evident in the

¹⁹ As it turned out, this tended to be true to a large extent, as some of the most original senior essays (particularly in fields such as history) were to be written by returnees from the University Service.

²⁰ The upper limit was subsequently raised to Eth\$225, which was the amount, for instance, that this author was paid when he did his service in Dembi Dollo (Southwestern Wallaga), deemed to be one of the hardship zones.

climactic demonstrations of 1969, when a number of EUS students were actually detained in their towns of assignment on charges of stirring up their students. One may even venture to push the story further and see in the EUS a precursor of one of the most ambitious and controversial programmes in rural transformation – the Development through Cooperation Campaign (known in short by its Amharic term, *Zamacha*) that the Darg launched in December 1974, a few months after it deposed Emperor Haile Sellassie.

STUDENT UNIONS ABROAD

It was not only inside the country that Ethiopian students received higher education. As in the earlier decades of the century, they continued to be sent abroad for that purpose, both before and after the establishment of UCAA, in the latter case often for a second or third degree. The first group of students consisted of graduates of the first secondary school, Kotebe. Almost invariably, they were sent to the United Kingdom for their higher education. The largest number went to North America (USA and Canada), followed by Lebanon and Germany. Egypt, Italy and the UK also had a high number of students, although nearly half of these were actually enrolled in secondary education. All in all, some 832 students were known to be studying abroad between 1958 and 1965. Students going to the US, Egypt, the UK and France were predominantly sponsored by the Ethiopian Government. The highest number of students was enrolled in the social sciences, followed by engineering, medical sciences and education.²¹

It was almost inevitable that students abroad would eventually form some kind of association to serve as a forum for discussion and/or to promote their interests. Betseat Kifle Sellassie identifies 'Association Mutualiste des Etudiants Ethiopiens en France' as the first Ethiopian students' association abroad. It was a sort of *eder* (self-help association) founded in 1920 by Ayeye Sebhat and included students in Paris and the provinces as well as cadets of the St. Cyr Academy. But the influence exerted by the federation of francophone African students, FEANF (Fédération des étudiants d'Afrique noire en France), and its Maghribi counterpart (UGESMAN) must have had a radicalizing effect (Betseat 1994: 162). In the post-war period, the first Ethiopian student organization was formed in the UK. The association was called the Ethiopian Student Society (ESS); it came into being in January 1947, more than four years before the UCAA was officially launched. The list of first officers of ESS reads like a *Who's Who* in the imperial political establishment and Ethiopian cultural landscape of the 1960s: Zewde Gabre-Selassie (president), Michael Imru (secretary), Endalkachew Makonnen (treasurer), Mengistu Lemma (editor), Mary Tadesse (juniors' representative) and Habte Ab Bairu (assistant secretary). Michael, Mengistu, Mary and Worku Habtewold successively assumed the

²¹ Statistical data kindly supplied to the author by Professor Christopher Clapham.

presidency after Zewde, Mary serving two terms. Emperor Haile Sellassie was the patron of ESS, while his grand-daughter, Princess Ayda Desta, and the Ethiopian minister (ambassador) in Britain, *Blatta* Ephrem Tewelde Medhen, were honorary presidents (*LC*: 1).

In 1949, ESS started publishing an annual paper entitled, appropriately enough in view of the royal patronage it enjoyed, *The Lion Cub*.²² In the very first issue, Endalkachaw explained the main objectives of ESS as being the desire to ensure that 'Ethiopian students in Britain should meet and know each other well' and 'to help British and other nationals know Ethiopia and Ethiopians'. In line with the first objective, ESS organized a weekend party in Oxford, where most of the students were located, on the occasion of Ethiopian Christmas. ESS also organized talks by some of its members on Ethiopian history, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, education and Ethiopia's modernization (*ibid.*).

The Lion Cub was distinguished by a high standard of the English language and journalistic production. It was more like a literary journal than a student paper, with even 'Notes on Contributors' at the end. The only blemish was in the Amharic articles, which, for lack of an Amharic printing press, had to be hand-written. Articles that featured in the columns of the paper included a short piece on the eucalyptus tree by Prince Sahla-Sellase Haile Sellassie (*ibid.*) (the emperor's youngest son), 'Post-Holiday Reflections' by Mary Tadesse and 'My First Day at the University' by Assefa Mengesha (*LC*: 4). Coping with the culture shock that greeted Ethiopians in the UK was a matter of overriding concern. The first issue thus contained the following piece of advice to new arrivals: 'If they find the food unpalatable, they might to prevent slow but sure starvation, buy red pepper from a shop in Oxford Street, and spray it on potatoes' (*LC*: 1). Perhaps the most hilarious piece in this vein was the short story written by Beyyene Welde Gebriel on the nightmare of every Ethiopian student in a Western setting: surnames, time reckoning and the calendar. Not only do the two fictitious characters of the story end up giving their baptismal names (which every Ethiopian Orthodox Christian would normally have) as their Christian names, but they also had the discomfiture of eating a dish allegedly called 'Welsh rabbit' that did not have any meat in it. Nor did matters end there. They had to explain to their incredulous interlocutors that, in Ethiopia, 'mornings start in the morning and not at midnight', February has 30 days, Christmas falls on 7 January and December comes before January in the same year! (*LC*: 6).²³

According to a former president of ESUE, Tedla Teshome, informal discussions about setting an Ethiopian students union in Europe apparently started in 1958 among students who had come to see an international

²² The Ethiopian emperor's official designation included 'Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah', alluding to his alleged descent from King Solomon and Queen Sheba.

²³ These mind-boggling assertions (to the Western mind, that is) refer to the fact that Ethiopians start their time reckoning at sunrise (i.e. 6 am) and the Ethiopian calendar, which starts in September, has twelve months of 30 days each and a 13th mini-month of five or six days (depending on whether it is leap year or not) at the end.

exhibition in Brussels. A constitution was drafted in Paris the following year by students coming from Britain and France. This was amended and ratified in the summer of 1960, when student representatives from France, Germany and the UK met in the city of Bonn (*UR*, I: 8). There were also some participants from Beirut, Greece and Italy. It was then decided to hold the first congress of the union the following year and the UK student association was designated to draft the agenda. The 1st ESUE Congress accordingly took place in Paris in 1961, marking the transition from what Betseat termed the 'palaver' (*sanbate*) phase to an era of more-committed student activism. But the student unions continued to benefit from government subsidies to hold their congresses and undertake their other activities (Betseat 1994: 168–9; Andargachew 2000: 5–6; OR: 19).²⁴ The first president of the union was Abraham Medhane, with Kebede Mengesha, who was studying civil engineering in Rome University, as the secretary. The 2nd Congress was held in Berlin in July 1962 and was attended by some 150 students. It passed a resolution on the eradication of illiteracy from Ethiopia and castigated the Ministry of Education for the high attrition rate in the elementary school, arguing that pupils should be allowed to join secondary school on the basis of their elementary school performance rather than through the wasteful nation-wide examination system. The emperor sent a message to ESUE after he received the Congress report, expressing his appreciation for the 'eight items of the agenda' but at the same time reminding them that actions speak louder than words. He also enjoined them to strive to 'sow seeds that bear fruit' (*Tataq*, 2: *Hamle* 1955 EC).

Subsequent ESUE congresses – as well as those of its North American counterpart, ESANA – were also duly reported by the Ethiopian government daily, *Addis Zaman* (e.g. *AZ*, 6.13.55, 8.12.56). These included the 3rd ESUE Congress, held in Strasbourg (France) in 1963, and the 4th, held in Bologna (Italy) in 1964.²⁵ Worku Ferede chose to think that the Strasbourg Congress marked a turning point in the evolution of ESUE, as the items discussed and the resolutions passed at that venue on education, development, history and culture showed a clear perspective on the country's problems (*Tataq*, *Magabit* 1956 EC). In actual fact, it was at the Bologna Congress that ESUE passed resolutions of decidedly political import, such as ensuring fair administration of justice, honouring of the rights guaranteed in the constitution (such as freedom of expression, assembly and demonstration as well as the privacy of correspondence), and an end to the torturing of suspects. The growing radicalization of ESUE was manifested in the subsequent congresses: the 5th, held in Vienna (Austria) in 1965 and the 6th, held in Kent (England) in

²⁴ Andargachew actually records that the exploratory meeting was held in Brussels in 1960 and the union was founded in Bonn in 1961, while both Asfaw Damte, the UK representative at the time, and Betseat recall that the first ESUE Congress was held in Paris in 1961. Even more divergent is a report in *Tataq* (2, *Hamle* 1955) that ESUE was first set up in 1950 EC (i.e. 1958) as በአውሮፓ የሚገኙ የኢትዮጵያ ተማሪዎች ማኅበር (Union of Ethiopian Students in Europe).

²⁵ There is some confusion about the serialization of ESUE congresses, arising probably from the fact that some sources reckon the Bonn meeting of 1960 which laid the foundation for ESUE as the first congress. I have chosen to base my serialization on a report by *Challenge* (VI: 1, August 1966), which dates the 5th ESUE Congress that was held in Vienna to August 1965.

1966. The 6th Congress, apart from electing Haile Fida as ESUE president, passed resolutions on both international and domestic issues. The former condemned the apartheid system in South Africa, continued colonial rule in the Portuguese colonies and the UDI-regime in Southern Rhodesia. On the domestic front, the Kent Congress reiterated the resolution of its predecessor to do away with the feudal order in Ethiopia and also called on respect for human rights. In apparent concern at the mushrooming of ethnic-based development associations in the country, it called on all Ethiopians to work for the good of the country irrespective of their ethnic and religious differences and the replacement of the ethnic-based associations by national ones. It also condemned the subservience of the Ethiopian regime to the US and its allies and called for the establishment of a genuinely popular-based government (IES CL 2395/01/2).

ESUE started its major theoretical organ, *Tataq*, probably in 1962.²⁶ The first editors, as one could gather from the second issue, were the Moscow-based Gulelat G. Maryam and Taffese Jarra. There is no indication that the name of the paper was inspired by the famous horse-name of Emperor Tewodros II (r. 1855–68). But, it did have the implication of girding oneself for struggle and sacrifice. As explained by one of the contributors:

ተግባርን የተባለው የኢትዮጵያ ወጣቶች የተጣለብንን ከባድ አላፊነት መዘነጋት የለብንም፡፡ አገራችንን ከነበረችበትና አሁንም ካለችበት ሁኔታዋ ወደ ዘመናዊው ሥልጣኔ ለማንዳናት (?) ቆርጦ መነሣት መታገልና ቢያስፈልግም ለመስዋዕትነት መዘጋጀት ያስፈልጋል፡፡ (*Tataq, Hamle* 1955/July 1963)

We educated Ethiopians should not forget the heavy responsibility entrusted to us. We have to rise with determination in order to transform our country from its present condition to one of modern civilization and if need be prepared to pay all the necessary sacrifice.

Amharic was chosen as the medium with a view to helping develop the language, until such time that the long-awaited ‘Amharic Language Academy’ was set up. The second issue was typed and had an A4 format, but the paper comes out hand-written in *Magabit* 1956 (March 1964), when the editorial venue shifted to Stockholm, with Elehu Feleke, Assefa Besufeqad and Aligaz Yaregal serving as editors. It continued to be hand-written until late 1965, which is amazing when one thinks of the pain of cutting the characters on stencil.

The sister regional organization, ESANA, had a longer pedigree. According to Ephraim Isaac, a former president, it was first established in 1948 (*UR*, I: 8). But, its first president, the veteran banker Tafari Deguefe, dates the first coming together of Ethiopian students in North America to 1950. The meeting of some fifty-five students (out of a total of sixty-five) took place at Lake Eshqugama in Minnesota. It opened with a message from the emperor and took place in the presence of *Ras* Emeru Haile Sellassie, the liberal Ethiopian ambassador in Washington DC, and a representative of the Ministry of

Education, Ato Efrem Boru. The meeting adopted the draft statute and elected the first officials of ESANA, with the president being sworn in in the presence of a notary. The 2nd ESANA Congress, which took place in Alberta (Canada), was actually organized by the educational attaché of the Ethiopian embassy in Washington DC. The incumbent executive committee was severely criticized for its close association with the establishment and its failure to produce the promised student magazine. Tafari was replaced by the more radical Gername Neway, who, as we have already seen above, eventually became one of the leaders of the 1960 coup (Tafari 2006: 123–5).

One of the distinctive achievements of Gername's leadership was the publication of a newsletter entitled *Ethiopian Student News*, to which Gername himself also contributed. ESANA's brand journal, *Challenge*, did not appear until around 1960. Indeed, the journal was merely known as *Journal of the Ethiopian Students (Association) in North America* in its early years, when it featured articles by Ethiopianist scholars (such as Donald Levine, on 'Ambiguity and Modernity') as well as ESANA student members. Government patronage of ESANA also persisted throughout the early 1960s. Thus, the 1962 Annual Congress was opened by Ato Lakew Mulat, the educational attaché of the Ethiopian Embassy (IES CL 2395/03/31). As Alem Habtu, another former leader of ESANA/ESUNA, recalls, the Association continued as a sort of social club until 1964, 'an extension of the Educational Attaché's office at the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington DC' (Alem 1987: 65). Annual congresses were also sponsored by the embassy, with a liberal supply of duty-free whisky. As already indicated above, the events were also generally reported by the government papers in Addis Ababa (e.g. AZ, 22.12.55, 26.12.55). In addition, both ESUE and ESANA used to get an annual subsidy of USD\$5000 from the imperial coffer in those early halcyon days (UR, I: 8).

The 12th Congress of ESANA, held in Cambridge (Massachusetts) in August/September 1964, marked the first moment of departure from the old pattern. In an act of deliberate breaking with the past tradition of royal tutelage, an organized group of students came up with a slate of radical student leaders and carried the day, albeit by a narrow margin. Hagos Gebre Yesus was elected president and Berhanu Abebe secretary-general, with Melesse Ayalew and Dessalegn Rahmato as editor and associate editor of *Challenge*, respectively (Bahru 2010: 64). The election featured the group of radicals who were to guide the student association for the remainder of the decade until they were dislodged by the crop of home-grown radicals who challenged their leadership after 1969.

SUMMING UP

The birth and growth of the Ethiopian student movement is inextricably linked with the development of higher education in Ethiopia. Inside the country, first UCAA and then HSIU formed its institutional base. While the correlation might not be as direct with regard to the foreign component of

the movement, it nonetheless remains true that, at least initially, associations were formed by Ethiopian students sent abroad to pursue their higher education. UCAA gave birth to UCU, the organizational embodiment of the movement at home from 1958 to 1965. ESANA had a longer pedigree, tracing its origins to 1950, the very year of the establishment of UCAA, and antedating its European equivalent – the Ethiopian Students Union in Europe (ESUE) – by about a decade.

Until at least 1960, students seemed more concerned with their intellectual development than with overtly political issues. ‘Know thyself’ and ‘know thy country’ appeared to be the ruling mottos. Debates and oratorical contests, rather than rallies and demonstrations, were the preferred mode of interaction. Nothing better illustrated the ascendancy of the ‘know thy country’ motto than the UCAA Ethnological Society, which flourished in the 1950s, with its scholarly Bulletin and its collection of specimens of material culture. The zeal to know about one’s country was coupled with eagerness to serve the community. Conducting literacy classes and building primary schools snowballed into what became the Ethiopian University Service, a student initiative that was ‘hijacked’ by the authorities.

Student papers, both at home and abroad, became an important medium for the definition of self and understanding of society. The earliest of them all was the London-based *The Lion Cub*, featuring articles to edify the British public about Ethiopia and tackling such issues as the challenges of adapting to an alien cultural environment. The papers at home initially laboured under the tutelage of the dean of students and were characterized by a dearth of contributions and a culture of anonymity – a culture that was to become a regular feature of student publications in subsequent years. Once they were able to establish their independence, however, these papers would become a vehicle of struggle. Among students abroad, the unabashedly loyal *The Lion Cub* gave way to *Tataq*, a rallying call for struggle.

Slowly, students began to have their voices heard beyond the campus. Nothing probably better encapsulated the students’ outreach to society in these early years than the College Day. It represented the climax of the students’ cultural and literary activities and was eagerly anticipated by the public. It was also dutifully attended by the emperor, who gave prizes to the winning poets, until things turned sour in the early 1960s. The annual gatherings of students abroad also enjoyed royal patronage, ranging from a liberal supply of whisky to the palpable presence of the educational attaché of the Ethiopian embassy. Just as the College Day at home contained within it the seeds of radicalism, the annual gatherings abroad, initially patronized by the state, provided the forum for growing estrangement from the imperial order.

4

The Process of Radicalization

*Now is the time to clear your throats and speak,
to clear your minds and think . . . A time has come
when you can feel that you are above animals.¹*

Conventionally, the year 1965, when Haile Sellasie I University (HSIU) students marched on the streets of Addis Ababa chanting 'Land to the Tiller', is seen as a landmark in the history of the Ethiopian student movement, heralding the start of a new era of revolutionary commitment. But, it makes greater sense to view 1965 as the culmination of a gradual process of radicalization rather than the birth of a new phenomenon that it is generally portrayed to be. In this regard, the coming of African scholarship students in 1958 forms an important development in increasing the political consciousness of Ethiopian university students. The 1960 coup d'état, in spite of its failure, also opened a new era of political opposition to the imperial regime by daring to challenge a system that was generally viewed as sacrosanct. The coup almost inexorably led to the tug-of-war around the College Day between the palace and the student leaders that resulted in the abolition of the boarding system in 1962 and the end of royal patronage. From then on, the process of radicalization continued, abetted, not created, by the radical group that came to be known as the Crocodiles. The 'Land to the Tiller' demonstration of 1965 represented the final moment of rupture, ushering a series of demonstrations and rallies and ultimately leading to the adoption of Marxist-Leninist ideology. We shall now examine by turns these various stages in the process of radicalization.

THE ROOTS OF RADICALISM

The Pan-African spirit and international links

It is not exactly clear what moved the emperor to initiate a programme that ultimately contributed to the erosion of his authority among Ethiopian university students. Maybe it was the feeling that, as a beacon of

¹ Shibru Seifu, UCU secretary-general, at the time of the 1960 coup (*N&V*, IV: 10).

black independence, Ethiopia had a moral obligation to provide the benefits of higher education to countries still under the colonial yoke. Yet, students were to come from independent countries like Egypt, Ghana and the Sudan as well. At any rate, the emperor reportedly made the pledge to award scholarships to students from other African countries at the 1st Conference of Independent African States in Accra in 1958. In June, Kwame Nkrumah, the host of that conference and leader of the first black African country to break out of colonial rule, Ghana, addressed University College of Addis Ababa (UCAA) students in the course of his visit to Ethiopia and expressed his hope to see the exchange of students between UCAA and the University College of Ghana 'in the not-too-distant future' (*UCAAN* I: 26). His hope became reality within a matter of months, although it was to remain a one-way traffic rather than the student exchange he had envisaged. The first batch of students, numbering twenty-six, arrived in early October 1958. They came from Kenya (one), Tanganyika (seven), Egypt (three), Ghana, Somaliland and Sudan (two each), Uganda and Zanzibar (one each). Fifteen of the students were enrolled at UCAA and eleven at the Engineering College. This first batch included two Kenyans, Robert Ouko and Omogi Caleb, who were to leave such an imprint on campus life (AZ, 23.05.50/31.1.58).² Robert Ouko eventually rose to become foreign minister of Kenya until he was murdered in 1990.

The academic year 1958/59 saw some other important developments pertaining to Ethiopia's place in Africa. The first was the official opening of the Economic Commission for Africa in December 1958; the event, which took place in the Ethiopian Parliament, received extensive coverage in the local dailies (cf. AZ, 20.04.51/29.12.58, and subsequent issues). The year also saw the visit of the flamboyant Kenyan labour leader, Tom Mboya, who gave a public lecture at the National Library. April 1959 was to be packed with a series of events of pan-African importance. The first was the release of Jomo Kenyatta from several years of detention on charges of instigating the Mau Mau rebellion.³ It also saw the laying of the cornerstone for the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa building that was to be known as 'Africa Hall' (AZ, 27.8.51/5.5.59). This coincided with the first observance of 'African Freedom Day', pursuant to the decision of the 1958 Accra summit. Pending the construction of the elaborate building that now forms an important feature of the Addis architectural landscape, the organization was temporarily headquartered at what later became the Ministry of Defence building.

The Africa Day celebration was a great national event. Offices were closed after 4 pm so that employees could attend the ceremonies, which included a speech by the emperor. UCAA students were actively involved in the celebration both on and off campus. The campus event included the

² The *UCAA Newsletter* of 3 October 1958 (II: 1) actually gives the number of students as eleven.

³ This was duly reported in the Amharic daily *Addis Zaman* (8.8.51/16.4.59), although, in a rather curious amalgam of the laudatory and the derogatory, Kenyatta was described as 'the heroic African patriot who led the Mau Mau *disturbance*' (emphasis added).



I. Emperor Haile Sellassie surrounded by delegates to the Conference of West, Eastern and Central African Students, 1960

(From author's personal collection)

singing of what was described as the African 'national anthem' in Swahili. For the benefit of a wider national audience, students also organized a panel discussion on Radio Ethiopia on the pre-colonial and colonial history of Africa in general as well as on South Africa. Asfaw Damte recalls that, in the course of the discussion, his depiction of the negative role of missionaries did not go particularly well with the Jesuit authorities at UCAA (Bahru 2010: 21).⁴

The following academic year (1959/60), when UCAA hosted a meeting of the representatives of West, Eastern and Central African students, was to contribute even more to the growing pan-African consciousness of Ethiopian students. The theme of the meeting, which lasted nearly a month (11 January–8 February 1960), was the 'Role of the Student in Emergent Africa'; it brought together some thirty student leaders from the sub-regions. The *Addis Zaman* report on the event described the enthusiasm of the audience that was following the proceedings at the YMCA, the venue of the conference, until 8 pm in the evening (AZ, 5.5.52/14.1.60). The topics discussed included: imperialism, student movements, the African independence struggle, the question of political parties, racism, illiteracy and the right to education, and the production of independent student newspapers (*N&V*, III: 13). Isaiah O.O. Onyemelukwe, writing in *The University College Journal*, characterized the event as a 'laboratory for research and practical

⁴ Cf. AZ, 12.8.51/20.4.59, for other participants of the panel discussion.

experiment in the unity of African students' life and, indirectly, a crucible for the analysis of the social, economic and political life of Africa. The experiment was successful' (*UCJ*, 3: 22). 'Above all', the writer concluded, 'the Ethiopian students were able to learn from their delegates the general condition of students' life and the struggle for the betterment of the lot of man beyond the Ethiopian mountains and across the border' (*ibid.*: 25). The *News and Views* report on the meeting underscored its value in even more direct language: 'by bringing out more clearly the situations and student problems of other parts of Africa, the efforts students make to overcome the various difficulties, handicaps and hindrances, will, there is no doubt, furnish us with criteria by which we can appraise our own progress' (*N&V*, III: 13, emphasis added). Among the lasting souvenirs of the conference were the commemorative photograph of the emperor surrounded by the delegates and the African scholarship students and the Mercedes Benz bus that had been purchased to transport the delegates and was subsequently donated to UCAA.⁵

UCAA students were called upon to express solidarity with fellow Africans fighting for freedom and equality in the years that followed. The first such event occurred following a BBC report of the beating to death of African prisoners in the British colony of Nyasaland (later renamed Malawi) in 1959. An unsigned announcement by the secretary-general of the University College Union (UCU) summoned students to a one-minute prayer on the football field. This feat was accomplished with such speed that the university authorities had no time to do anything, even if they might have been inclined to stop it (Bahru 2010: 21). On the other hand, the more notorious Sharpeville Massacre of March 1960 evoked more reaction in the government press than in student papers.⁶ Curiously enough, about a year later, UCAA students were treated to a debate on the pros and cons of apartheid and the *News and Views* report on it paid tribute to the proponent of 'parallel development' for an argument, which, 'apart from its informative value, was worthy of our attention because it provided us with a perfect example of a person who stands by his principles' (*N&V*, IV: 27). But the murder of Patrice Lumumba in January 1961 did have reverberations on campus. A five-minute memorial silence was held to express the students' shock and anger. Even if one of the scholarship students was to express his displeasure at the poor turnout (*N&V*, IV: 16), the lingering impact of the iconic figure was demonstrated by this March 30 entry in the 'That will

⁵ The photograph is still to be seen as part of the permanent exhibition 'From Palace to University' at the entrance to Ras Makonnen Hall in the main campus of AAU. The Mercedes bus became a regular feature of student commuting in the years that followed.

⁶ See, for instance, *AZ*: 15.3.52/25.11.59, 16.3.52/26.11.59, 20.3.52/30.11.59. The second issue featured an article by the famous newscaster Asamenew Gebre Weld, asking when the crimes being committed by South African whites against the black nationals was going to come to an end. 'Their only crime,' he went on, 'was the colour of their skin and the fact that they gave up their own land'. Similarly, the Amharic daily had an almost celebratory report on the shooting of Hendrik Verwoerd, the architect of apartheid, in April 1960: *AZ*, 3.4.52/13.12.59.

be the day' column: 'That will be the day when UC guys get over the fad of wearing Lumumba beards' (*N&V*, IV: 21).⁷

While the African scholarship students did exert a radicalizing influence on their Ethiopian colleagues, this did not mean that there was no tension between the two groups. Asfaw Damte recalls the trouble he had to go through trying to pacify his Kenyan friend Omogi Caleb, who had expressed his dismay at the racial slurs of Ethiopian students. Caleb had been elected to the post of secretary-general of UCU in 1959/60 and, dissatisfied with the cautious tone of the student paper, had pioneered a short-lived alternative known as *Campus Star*. Towards the end of the academic year 1963/64, a major controversy erupted involving the editor of *News and Views*, Kifle Abate, and ultimately leading to his dismissal from the university. It revolved around his mis-spelling of a Ugandan scholarship student, which was construed by the scholarship students and the university administration as a deliberate slur on him and other scholarship students. Ethiopian students were enraged by the measure, which they deemed extreme, and demanded the editor's reinstatement. When they walked out on the president of the university as he tried to address them, they were asked to apologize for their conduct or forfeit taking the second semester exams. This triggered a division among the student body, with all but one of the graduating students deciding to apologize; the rest were apparently keen on getting their degrees (Getachew reminiscences).⁸

The Jesuits, who resented the irreverent attitude of the scholarship students, were not averse to fomenting these divisions, either. They went even further and reported on scholarship students frequenting the Soviet library (or Permanent Exhibition, as it was officially designated) and the Soviet Embassy. A Ghanaian student by the name of Henry Botchway was dismissed on those grounds. Nor was Botchway the only one. The Nigerian student Dennis Ejindu had become such a regular contributor of *News and Views* that an Ethiopian detractor alleged that 'some people have begun to call this paper 'News and Dennis' Views' (*N&V*, III: 22). In December 1960, Ejindu wrote what was perhaps his last contribution as he prepared to join what he dubbed somewhat hyperbolically the 'mass exodus' of scholarship students from the country, adding that the truth behind the exodus will emerge one day. The Ethiopian Government should rest assured 'that they had succeeded as a very powerful rocket in launching these student missiles into the outer space of higher learning'. Not all, he added, have used UCAA as 'a springboard for Russia' (*N&V*, IV: 10).

Far from there being an 'exodus', as Ejindu claimed, the number of scholarship students continued to increase, particularly after the United States

⁷ Public memorials of the Congolese freedom-fighter were curiously confined to naming bars after him. Thus there were two of these, one in the notorious red light district of Addis Ababa (otherwise known as Webe Baraha) and another in the resort town of Nazareth, some 100 km to the southeast.

⁸ The lone dissenter, on the basis of his own testimony, was the ousted president of UCU, Getachew Ar'aya.

Agency for International Development stepped in to award these scholarships. In 1961, following the inauguration of HSIU, they began to award fifty four-year full scholarships to Ethiopian and ten to students from other African countries, yearly. The latter quota was raised to one hundred in 1963, with 6,500 applicants reported (*N&V*, X: 14).⁹ Accordingly, a record number of African scholarship students (one hundred) joined HSIU in the academic year 1963/64, twenty-two of them coming from Nigeria, sixteen from Kenya and thirteen from Uganda (*AZ*, 9.1.56/20.9.63).

In 1961/62, UCAA hosted two African leaders. Tom Mboya, who had already been to Ethiopia in 1959 and given a public lecture, paid another visit in October 1961, this time directly to the UCAA, and gave a speech entitled 'Kenya Today' (*N&V*, V: 3). In February 1962, the ANC leader Oliver Tambo gave a lecture entitled 'The End Begins [for apartheid South Africa?]' (*N&V*, V: 18). But the climax of the articulation of Ethiopia's pan-African identity was the summit of May 1963 which resulted in the formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). Letters congratulating the emperor on bringing together the two divergent blocs of African states (the Monrovia and Casablanca groups) were written by both the president of the Ethiopian University Teachers' Association, Mesfin Wolde Mariam, and the president of UCU, Wondwossen Hailu (*AZ*, 24.9.55/1.6.63, 26.9.55/3.6.63). A *News and Views* editorial of 17 May sounded a more cautionary, not to say sarcastic, note as preparations were being finalized for the summit: 'Monarchs and presidents, dictators and constitutional leaders, socialists and liberals, revolutionists and revolutionaries, all will shortly sit face to face to hammer out means to attain that oft-repeated political fiction – African Unity'. It called for a more realistic approach to unity, such as building an African university and 'the development of inter-continental [*sic*] system of communication and exchange of commerce . . . Instead of building facades, therefore, be it in words or meagre activities, Africans and leaders should convince themselves to come down to practical politics as academicians and scholars would like to call it' (*N&V*, VII: 27). This scepticism did not stop UCU from holding a grand 'African Unity Party' to mark 'the enthusiasm with which the UC students received the news of the African Summit Conference' (*N&V*, VII: 29).

While the continental dimension in the growing political consciousness of Ethiopian university students was certainly important, this is not to underestimate the wider international influences. Student leaders were invited to the various international conferences hosted by the rival international student organizations – the pro-West International Students Conference (ISC) based in Leiden (Netherlands) and the Eastern-bloc-oriented International Union of Students (IUS) based in Prague (Czechoslovakia). Thus, Hagos Gebre Yesus (president of UCU) and Berhane Ghebray attended the International Students Conference meeting in Lima (Peru) in early 1959,

⁹ Berhane Meskel Redda, who was one of the Ethiopian recipients of these scholarships, wrote that he came to know about his sponsor only when he was invited to a reception. Apparently, the winners had been collecting their money without knowing who was actually sponsoring them (*N&V*, X: 14).

while Asfaw Damte (secretary-general) and Mekbib Gebeyehu (social affairs president) represented UCAA at the Pan-African conference in Tunis later in the year (*UCAAN* II: 14; *N&V*, III: 1). Asfaw Damte in fact recalls the competition between the two umbrella organizations to win over the allegiance of the Ethiopian students (Bahru 2010: 23).

But undoubtedly the most memorable international travel and the one with probably the greatest impact was the one-year sojourn of Gebeyehu Ferissa in Norway in 1959/60. Not only did the visit leave a strong impact on the student but he was also determined to pass this on to his fellow students. On his return, he gave a lecture to a packed audience ('250 men and three girls') in which he compared students' life in Norway and Ethiopia. The speech was so stimulating that it was 'many a time interrupted by loud applause from the students'. It was deemed so important that *News and Views* published most of the speech in a supplementary issue. The thrust of Gebeyehu's delivery was the need for an independent student newspaper – a point that he elaborated in the following terms:

Our university college falls short of this goal in many respects . . . Our college argues that we are not yet mature for a free college paper and for university autonomy . . . One comes to truth through error . . . Nothing original comes through the mind of a man who is never given a chance to express himself and weigh his own ideas against those of others . . . It is not difficult to visualize the sort of personality our college is leading us to be after graduation – passive and bookish individual with no bit of thinking that he can call his own . . . We appeal to it [the College] to change its policy and give us an unconditional student paper, without which our fate is condemned to the same path as that of the students of Persia [who, shackled by Muslim orthodoxy, could not adjust to life in the West when they went for their studies] . . . The answer lies in the student paper, student-run, and student-controlled. We need a student paper for ourselves and a student paper that goes out to the general public, bearing the fruit of the investment they have laid on us through free education, free lodging and free food. (*N&V*, IV: 4)

This goal of an independent newspaper, Gebeyehu added, was to be achieved through negotiation with the university authorities. However, if they did not relent, Gebeyehu offered the following advice to his fellow students:

Make a peaceful demonstration, go to His Imperial Majesty, tell Him we are not in the least deserving of the name of college students without the possession of a single student paper. He will give your petition due consideration, for he is a man who respects history . . . I believe . . . that a free student paper is worth all other extra-curricular activities. (*ibid.*)

The kind of external influences described above played an important role in the radicalization of Ethiopian students abroad as well. Ethiopian Students Union in North America (ESUNA) leaders identified a number of ways in which such external influences manifested themselves. The first



2. Gebeyehu Ferissa
(Courtesy of Dr Mulatu Jote)

and probably most direct influence came from the US civil rights movement of the 1960s. Although Ethiopians initially went to the US blissfully assuming that they were not 'Negro' (or 'nigger', as the racist lexicon had it), they were made painfully aware soon enough that their relatively paler complexion did not spare them from that label. At the same time, they came to be impressed both by the formidable force that the civil rights movement was able to mobilize to ensure the dignity of the black race and its pan-Africanist orientation. A second source of inspiration was Cuba, and more particularly the charismatic figure of Che Guevara. One of the leaders of ESUNA, Hagos Gebre Yesus, had in fact been to Cuba and this excursion was to invest him with a halo of revolutionary respectability. A third important element in their radicalization process, particularly in the second half of the 1960s, was Vietnam. This was quite understandable, as the whole of the United States came to be rocked by anti-war protests at this time. As recalled by Dessalegn Rahmato: '... not a day would pass in which a rally did not take place, protest tracts were not read, Vietnam was not discussed, a demonstration was not staged or war protests were not shouted' (Bahru 2010: 37–38).

There is no doubt that, with the exception of the civil rights movement that was specific to the United States, similar influences operated among Ethiopian students in Europe as well. Vietnam was a matter of universal concern, providing the hero (North Vietnam and the Viet Cong) and the villain (Uncle Sam). Mao's China provided the backdrop, inspiring Ethiopian students to duplicate the revolutionary transformation of a predominantly rural country similar to Ethiopia. What came to be broadly defined as the New Left also left its imprint on both sides of the Atlantic as well as to some extent inside Ethiopia. The works of Herbert Marcuse, Frantz Fanon, Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy were avidly read by quite a few Ethiopian students.

The 1960 coup

What makes Gebeyehu's inspiring speech all the more remarkable is the fact that it came barely two months before the abortive December 1960 coup. A week after the *News and Views* report on that speech, S.O. Tala and I.K.S. Tibamwenda, presumably African scholarship students, were writing of a 'wind of change' blowing in the campus, adding: 'Let it not develop into a hurricane but rather a gentle and steady breeze which will do us some good' (*N&V*, IV: 5). The writers could hardly be said to have had a premonition of the impending plot. Rather, they seem to have been concerned more with campus issues. It is nonetheless an interesting coincidence that 'a wind of change' did blow not only across campus but also throughout the nation only a month after they penned down their piece.

Like almost everybody else, the coup caught UCAA students by surprise. As the *News and Views* report of 16 December puts it: 'Students and staff members at UCAA slept normally during the night of 13–14 December and awoke in the morning unaware that a new government for Ethiopia had been established during the night' (*N&V*, IV: 10). What followed is recounted in considerable detail in Balsvik (1985: 94–97). A turning point in the students' commitment to the coup appears to have followed the meeting of the president and secretary-general of UCU, Teshome Habte Gabriel and Shibru Seifu, respectively, with the leader of the coup, Brigadier General Mengistu Neway. They came elated after that meeting, Teshome declaring: 'Today marks a new era; the old Regime has been overthrown and a new one established on behalf of the people', adding that he was 'in favour of the new Regime provided that it is not a military coup d'état'. Shibru was even more emphatic in his expression of solidarity with the change-seekers: 'Now is the time to clear your throats and speak, to clear your minds and think . . . A time has come when you can feel that you are above animals' (*N&V*, IV: 10).

These words appear to have inspired the students – at any rate a sizable proportion of them – to go out into the street in support of the coup. This was the first time that students had ventured outside their campus championing a public cause. Slightly varied versions of what they chanted on the streets are given by Balsvik (*ibid.*: 96) and Paulos (2006: 102). The essence of their message, however, was rousing the populace to break out of their bondage and reclaim their freedom. A dazed public could hardly have understood the full import of their conduct. According to Balsvik, they seemed to have had some success in enlisting the support of the crowd in the Mercato area. But, they faced stern opposition from the loyalist forces encamped at the First Division headquarters of the Army in the southern outskirts of the city. A tense moment of confrontation followed before the students realized that the loyalists were serious about carrying out their threat to shoot the students down if they proceeded any further, and they returned to their campus.

That retreat, accentuated by the failure of the coup, was to be followed by some embarrassing recantations. *Addis Zaman* gleefully reported expressions of apology to the emperor by students of the three colleges in Addis

Ababa (UCAA, Building College and Engineering College); the representative of the third college actually claimed that they had come out into the streets duped by messengers of the the coup-makers and believing that their demonstration would prevent bloodshed (AZ, 24.4.53/2.1.61). A matter of particular concern was the detention of three of their colleagues, including Mebratu Gebeyyehu, brother of Colonel Warqeneh Gebeyyehu, the security chief who had sided with the coup-makers and had committed suicide when it failed. Mebratu was eventually released after about three months of detention but was denied admission back to the college. On the occasion of the emperor's visit to UCAA in late March 1961, one of the students read a petition for Mebratu's readmission in terms that could only be described as fulsome:

ግርማዊነትዎን ከልብ የሚያፈቅረው ሕዝብዎ፤ የግርማዊነትዎን ጠላት ስለማይፈቅድ፤ እንዲኖርም ስለማይሻ፤ ዱካ በዱካ ይከተለዋል፤ ተከትሎም ያጠፋዋል፡፡ በዓላማዎ የሚከተለው፤ በከፈቱለት የሥልጣኔ ጉዳና የሚነገሩት፤ በዘረጉለት የትምህርት ገበታ የሚሳተፈው የዩኒቨርሲቲ ኮሌጅ ተማሪ ሁሉ፤ ለግርማዊነትዎ ያለው ታማኝነት የማይናወጽና የጸና፤ ሳይናወጽም ጸንቶ የሚኖር ነው፡፡ (AZ, 18.7.53/27.3.61)

Your people, who love you from the bottom of their hearts, will not tolerate any enemy of Your Majesty. They will pursue and destroy him. The University College student, who follows the path of civilization you have charted for him and partakes of the educational opportunity you have offered him, has only eternal and unwavering loyalty to you.

The emperor acceded to the request for Mebratu's readmission and the gesture was 'greeted with loud cheers and handclapping' (N&V, IV: 21).

But it would be misleading to conclude from the above that the students had been forced into cowed submission to the imperial order. True, the suppression of the coup appeared to have been consummated with the hanging of the leader, Mengistu Neway, on 30 March 1961. But, as we have seen in Chapter 2, this act, far from rooting out opposition to the regime, initiated an era of strident, if largely clandestine, dissent. The coup may have failed, but it certainly rattled the mystique of royal power. Getachew Ar'aya, president of UCU in the 1963/64 academic year, called the coup 'an eye-opener', elaborating the change of mood in the following terms:

The first time that I heard anyone criticizing the emperor . . . was during the attempted coup d'état in 1960. Most of us were aware that there were things that were seriously wrong in our country. Indeed, we could observe a lot of injustice around us. Because of our upbringing and the brainwashing at school we were led to believe that all the problems of the country were created by the government officials who were betraying the trust of the emperor. We surmised that the emperor did no wrong. The accusations leveled at the emperor at the time of the attempted coup d'état and the attempt itself served as an eye-opener for most of us. (Getachew reminiscences)

that was prevalent in the country. As we have seen, royal displeasure at the recital of that poem led to the futile attempt by the palace to control the proceedings of the following College Day. Adamant at preserving their academic freedom, the students were punished with the abolition of the boarding system, which in turn only accelerated the radicalization that the regime had feared.

In the long run, the coup and its leaders – their bungle and the hostage massacre notwithstanding – were to occupy a hallowed place in the tradition of the student movement. In an evocation of the term applied to the officers who led an unsuccessful revolt against Tsarist rule in Russia in 1825, the 1960 coup-makers were dubbed ‘Decembrists’ by more than one student columnist. The implication was that others would follow in their trail and finish the work they had started. As we have seen in Chapter 2, this sentiment was echoed in a 1966 review of the first sympathetic account of the coup, Richard Greenfield’s *Ethiopia: A New Political History*, by Melesse Ayalew, editor of *Challenge*. Perhaps the most thorough and analytical student assessment of the coup was published in *Tataq*, the Ethiopian Students Union in Europe (ESUE) theoretical journal, on the tenth anniversary of the coup. The seventeen-page editorial gave two major reasons for the commemoration of the event:

1: እነዚህን ቆራጦች የምናስታውሳቸው ዛሬ እኛም እንደነሱው ሀገራችንን በመውደድ እንደነሱው ለህዝባችን መልካም ኑሮ በመቆርቆር የትግል ጉዳዩ ስለመረጥን ነው፡፡ ...

2: : ይህንን የታህሳሳዊያን መከራ በታሪካችን አዲስ የሚያደርገው ሞከሪዎቹ ራሳቸው የቆየው የፌውዳል ስርአት መጠነኛ እድገት የፈለፈላቸው ከዚህ በፊት በሃገሪቱ ያልታዩ አዳዲስ ሃይሎች መሆናቸው፡ በግልፅ ለእርምጃ ብለው መነሳታቸውና ለዚህም ለታቀደው እርምጃ ፈታቸውን ወደ ንጉሥ ነገስቱ ከመመለስ ያልቅ የቆየው የአገዛዝ ዘዴ ብቁ አለመሆኑን ተገንዝበው አዲስ ዘዴን በሃይል ሊያመጡ መነሳታቸው ነው፡፡ (*Tataq*, Miyazya 1963/April 1971)

1. We commemorate these brave people because, inspired like them by love of country and the desire to improve the lot of our people, we have chosen the path of struggle.
2. What makes this effort of the Decembrists unique in our country is that the coup-makers were new forces that emerged from modest changes that the feudal system was undergoing, that they unequivocally opted for progress, and that, in order to achieve this, they did not rely on the goodwill of the emperor but, clearly cognizant of the inadequacies of the old system, wanted to forge a new one by force.

But the piece went much beyond the celebratory tone of its opening salvo. It tried to trace possible historical antecedents and pointed to the writings of Afawarq Gebre Yesus and Gebre Heywet Baykedagn before the war, the republican movement in its immediate aftermath and the struggles of *Blatta Takkala Welde Hawaryat* and *Bitwaddad* Negash in subsequent years. It gave biographical sketches of the coup leaders, citing passages from the MA thesis of Germame that were pertinent to the Ethiopian reality and his repeated but

ultimately futile efforts to organize the elite. It also provided a chronology of the events of those mid-December days, highlighting the strategic importance of the railway underpass near the First Division (commonly known as Mashwalakya). Interestingly enough, the editorial uses a term which was to have such momentous importance in the ensuing history of the country, *darg*, for the committee that the coup-makers had set up. In its anatomy of the coup, the journal article identified the failure of the coup leaders to mobilize even the military elite, let alone the people at large, as the major factor behind the coup's abortion. Instead, they naïvely assumed that 'once we take the initiative, everyone will follow us'.

THE CROCODILES

There is general consensus that the radicalization of university students showed a dramatic increase following the birth of the 'Crocodile Society', or the Crocodiles (Crocs for short), as they were more commonly known. Although, as Balsvik records (1985: 118), they might have been around since 1963, the Crocodiles made their formal appearance onto the campus scene on 14 December 1964 with this intriguing announcement in *News and Views*:

A non-aligned, non-sectarian, private society has been established in the UC. Its membership is strictly based on cross-examination and dedication to its cause. The Central Committee is the decisive and governing body. The name of the person who should be contacted for further information can be obtained from the *News and Views* office. (*N&V*, XI: 6)

This was a curious announcement, which combined freemasonic secrecy with the sponsorship of an official student paper. The exact membership of the 'society' has remained a closely guarded secret to this day. Nor have the surviving members been particularly keen to tell their story. Their history, as their deeds, remains shrouded in mystery. But, the following names have very often been mentioned as the founding members:

1. Abera Wakjira
2. Gebru Gebrewold
3. Hailu Gebre Yohannes
4. Seyoum Welde Yohannes
5. Taye Gurmu
6. Yohannes Sebhatu
7. Zer'u Kishen (Kiflu 1993: 37)

Gebru and Zer'u, who had both transferred from Alemaya Agricultural College to UCAA, might very well have been the main moving spirits behind the formation of the group. According to a former student leader who claims to have been a close associate of the group at the time, some graduates were also members. The society's aim was the propagation of Marxist ideas among the student population, with the graduates probably

providing most of the Marxist literature (OR: 47). The Russian Library in Addis Ababa, or the Soviet Permanent Exhibition as it was formally known, was another source of Marxist works.

A number of radical steps that students took after 1964 are commonly associated with the Crocodiles. Even the ousting in 1963/64 of the incumbent executive committee led by Getachaw Ara'ya (president) is customarily attributed to the Crocodiles, although they had not yet declared their existence by then.¹⁰ According to Balsvik, a medley of factors was behind this unprecedented move by what was called the 'Revisionist Party'. Unprecedented because, as the executive committee was elected for only one academic year, there has generally been little need felt to set up the kind of opposition party that the group declared in its manifesto, let alone the change of leadership that finally came about. The critique that the opposing group levelled against the incumbent leadership included its neglect of student welfare, its stand at the National Union of Ethiopian University Students (NUEUS) 3rd Congress and its failure to involve students in matters of immediate relevance to them. Although the leadership apparently had the support of the dean of students and is alleged to have tried to discredit the opposition by invoking the usual refrain of 'a foreign hand', it could not stem the tide and was forced to quit. According to Balsvik, the leader of the 'revisionist party' was a certain Taddese Gebru, and, even though the members of the new executive committee had no known association with them, there is general agreement that the Crocodiles were the main force behind the move (Balsvik 1985: 125–6).

The person at the centre of the dramatic turn of events, Getachew Ar'aya, gives a slightly different version of events in a testimonial that he deposited with me. He takes strong exception to the labelling of the change as 'a coup', preferring to call it 'a peaceful revolution'. According to him, the idea of an opposition party was actually something that he had himself proposed in his campaign speech. He regretted that he was not able to implement it, as it would have avoided the revolt that took place against his leadership. He identifies two principal factors behind the ousting of the incumbent leadership, which was done in a perfectly legal manner rather than as the 'coup' it has generally been portrayed to be: the failure of the leadership to deliver on its campaign promise and its failure to take a united stand at a NUEUS congress where the legality of the newly formed union of the College of Business Administration students was being debated. The meeting that voted on the change of leadership was actually called not with the theatrical ringing of a campus bell (as claimed by one of the participants in the 2005 retreat on the student movement – Bahru 2010: 50) but after a collection of signatures and the announcement of the meeting on campus notice boards. Taddese Gebru, who chaired the meeting, was a graduating student and not a leader of the opposition. The meeting duly set up an

¹⁰ The fact that Berhane Meskel Redda (press & information officer) was one of the ousted officers reinforces the point that he was not initially a member of the group, although Balsvik (*ibid.*) includes him in her list.

election committee, which administered the elections, with Tereffe Wolde Tsadik being elected president in place of Getachew Ar'aya (Getachew reminiscences).

It was only one step from engineering what was perceived to be a coup to assuming power themselves. This the Crocodiles did in May 1965, illegally according to the university administration as the student union had actually been disbanded following the 'Land to the Tiller' demonstration in February.¹¹ The aquatic reptile had finally come over ground. This, pursuant to the law of biology, was to prove disastrous, for the university administration responded by suspending the nine members of the newly set up executive committee 'for an indefinite period which shall be not less than fifteen months'. The reason given for the suspension was that the students had 'flagrantly and deliberately violated University regulations'. Their list reads like a *Who's Who* of the Crocodile Society (Fentahun 1990: frontispiece):

1. Berhane Meskel Redda
2. Zer'u Kishen
3. Gebru Gebrewold
4. Haylu Gebre Yohannes
5. Taye Gurmu
6. Seyoum Wolde Yohannes
7. Yohannes Sebhatu
8. Michael Abebe
9. Habte Giyorgis Mulat

Student folklore has perpetuated a different perception of the conduct of the suspended students, christening them the 'Nine Saints' (*Tas'atu Qeddusan* in Ge'ez), after the evangelists who came to Ethiopia from Asia Minor in the fifth century and spread Christianity in the Ethiopian highlands.

The strident language that the Crocodiles had begun to employ against the US presence in Ethiopia, as much as it was about the raising of a fundamental issue such as land ownership, may have contributed to the drastic step taken by the university administration. Significantly enough, the letter of suspension was written by the American academic vice-president, Edward D. Myers. When one reads through the writings of UCAA students, one detects the beginning of an anti-American orientation only towards the end of 1964, and that in the contributions of two known Crocodiles. Thus, in November 1963, we have Eshetu Chole and Berhane Meskel Redda going out of their way to make two identical complaints on the coverage of the latter's campaign speech (for the post of press & information officer) by the

¹¹ Balsvik (1985: 318 n.) actually claims that Gebru assumed the presidency in February when the duly elected officer, Baro Tumsa, had to go on university service. This looks improbable as one normally went on the service at the beginning and not in the middle of the academic year. Besides, we meet Baro addressing the student general assembly on the eve of the 'Land to the Tiller' demonstration.

reporter of *News and Views*. The latter made a disclaimer that he did not say he would 'send back the Yankee across the Atlantic', but rather that 'U.C. students should send back the infamous "Yankee Campus Imperialism" to where it came from'. For the record, he quoted exactly what he said: 'There is a cloud of Yankee *Campus* Imperialism hovering in the skies of our College. We are to send back this cloud across the Atlantic Ocean' (*N&V*, X: 5; emphasis added).

This ambivalent stance towards the United States can partly be explained by the spell of the Kennedy presidency. Thus, the universal grief that his assassination in November 1963 caused all over the world was echoed on the UCAA campus as well. *News and Views* came out with an editorial entitled 'Grief For A Great Emancipator', describing the slain president as 'an entertainer of the noble causes of peace, freedom, and the equality of human rights [*sic*]'. The UCU leadership also came up with a statement, while the secretary-general wrote a letter to President Lyndon B. Johnson, calling Kennedy America's 'second Lincoln'. Poems were written by Abebe Worke and Kebede Shume, with the latter evoking once again the Lincoln parallel. Another contributor, Messele Ejigu, wrote a piece entitled 'Down with Democracy', a line of thought which was echoed in the editorial: 'Democracy has its own limits. If democracy means the brutal assassination of a man as great as President Kennedy, then democracy ceases to have virtue' (*N&V*, X: 7).

In addition to the Kennedy aura, the United States happened to be represented at this time by one of its most astute diplomats, Edward M. Korry (1963–67).¹² He was prepared to engage students in discussions on US policy. Thus, in early 1964, he invited students to a discussion on 'US Policy Towards Ethiopia'. The UC Debating Society, which communicated the invitation to the students, urged them, apparently echoing the embassy letter, 'to come prepared and "fire even stinging questions"' (*N&V*, X: 15). The 'stinging questions' no doubt referred primarily to a sore point in the US presence in Ethiopia, i.e. their base in Asmara (called Kagnew), which the students regarded as a military base but which the embassy argued was merely a communications base. On 28 February 1964, the mountain came to Muhammad (as it were) when Ambassador Korry addressed UC students at the dining hall. Asked inevitably about Kagnew, he replied that 'it was purely a communications centre, not a strongly fortified military base' and reiterated his invitation to students to come in groups and discuss such issues with him. In mid-April 1964, the director of the United States Information Service (USIS) overstepped the mark when, approached by the president and press & information officer of UCU and the editor-in-chief of *News and Views* to buy advertising space on the College Day journal, he made it conditional on the press & information officer and editor-in-chief agreeing to visit the Kagnew base and

¹² A fervent anti-communist, Korry went on to be US Ambassador in Chile, including during the momentous years of Salvador Allende's short-lived presidency. Initially suspected of having been at the centre of the coup that toppled the Marxist president, he was eventually cleared when it transpired that the Nixon Administration had actually worked behind his back: *New York Times*, 30 January 2003.

writing a report on the status of the base. This provoked an editorial entitled 'A Miscalculated Move', with the emphatic statement: '... we would like to make it clear that any attempt made by any individual or any organization to bribe responsible student leaders (as did the Director of USIS) is very much resented and totally unacceptable' (N&V, X: 21).

Just as there were forces (Kennedy and Korry) that tended to push students on the side of the USA, there were other events and developments that showed Uncle Sam's uglier side. The first significant event that highlighted the latter was the visit of Malcolm X in October–November 1964. The second and more enduring phenomenon was Vietnam. Tesfatsion Medhaniaie, a freshman student at the time, vividly recalls the radical African-American leader's impassioned and inspiring speech and his bold critique of US society. A *News and Views* report at the time conveyed the atmosphere in these words: 'His extremely powerful voice, his excellent choice of words, but above all the conviction and enthusiasm with which he spoke kept all in the meeting literally spell-bound' (Quoted in Balsvik 1985: 200). When he was assassinated soon after his return to the US, students hung a big commemorative poster of the African-American leader on campus. Yet, as late as December 1964, we notice that students were still wavering between the pro- and anti-American lines. On 14 December, the *News and Views* editor castigated the president of UCU for unilaterally sending a letter of protest to the US president and the Belgian foreign minister on the landing of paratroopers in Stanleyville (Congo), dubbing it 'A hasty decision' and claiming that he had received six letters of protest on the matter.

This was followed by two countering contributions by Gebru Gebrewold and Zer'u Kishen in subsequent issues of the paper. The latter's was a direct response to the *News and Views* editorial, arguing that, far from being hasty, the president's letter was belated as Kotebe students had already taken the initiative and come out in demonstration against the move. It was objectionable neither in its tone nor in its content. Rather, the editorial 'was not consistent with UC-ism; it was not consistent with Pan-Africanism'. Rather calumniously, Zer'u went even further and averred that the editorial appeared to have been written after a buffet at the US cultural attaché's residence (N&V, XI: 8). Gebru's was a general piece on the threat of 'Americanism', which he defines as 'a potential and destructive disease, the vector of whose infections is the DOLLAR' (original emphasis). It was characterized by insidious infiltration through high-interest loans, out of which a substantial sum is allocated to experts' fees and salaries. In what he falls short of describing as imperialism or neo-colonialism, he concludes:

The days are far when colonialism was so necked [*sic*] to be noticeable to the average fool. At present, however, colonialism has entered through the back door. Camouflaged in the *economic aid*, it has, in Darwinian terms, successfully evolved and adapted itself to the changing social, economic and political conditions of the developing nations. (N&V, XI: 7)

on the injurious effects of the US base at Kagnew, pointing in particular to the danger it posed for the country of getting embroiled in Soviet-US military confrontations – of the kind that emerged during the Cuban missile crisis – and its contribution to the rampancy of prostitution in Asmara. To this, the editor appended a note, reminding readers of Ambassador Korry's reassurances earlier in the year that there were no arms at Kagnew and of his invitation to students to visit the base to find out the true state of affairs for themselves (*N&V*, XI: 5).

Another contentious aspect of 'Americanism' on campus was the American Field Service (AFS for short) – a programme that provided for a selected group of high school students to spend their final year in the USA, staying with an American family. The students, who were then admitted to college without having to take the school-leaving examinations, generally came back with some glaring Americanisms, notably in their accent and their dress styles. The tender age at which they were exposed to American life styles not only helped them pick up easily the American accent but also led to some degree of cultural alienation.¹³ The deriders of the programme even had an unflattering Amharic rendition of 'field service': *yameda agalgelot*. There were a few exchanges in the columns of *News and Views* in 1964/65, probably the second year after the programme was introduced, between those who chided the returnees for their accent and those who countered that British English was not necessarily standard English; between those, like Gebru Gebrewold, who saw it as yet another injurious manifestation of Americanism and those who argued that students were sufficiently mature to choose what they wanted and reject what they did not (*N&V*, XI: 7, 9). The debate continued into 1966, when Fanuel Deggie, one of the candidates for the presidency of the Main Campus Student Union (MCSU) in 1965/66, described the returnees as 'Americans-in-Ethiopian-skin' and particularly resented their admission to the university without sitting for the school-leaving certificate examinations, asking: 'Are their tight jeans, slangs and U.S. highschool jerseys passports to HSIU?' (*N&V* 2nd series, I: 2).

The Peace Corps, who had started with all the hope and promise of the Kennedy era, also increasingly came under attack in the second half of the 1960s, being regarded more and more as the spearhead of American imperialism. So much so that one of the lecturers, Mesfin Wolde Mariam, had to come to their defence. In a piece unequivocally entitled 'In Defense of the PCVs', he urged guiding their teaching and controlling their influences rather than condemning them outright and thereby stifling 'their initiative and enthusiasm for constructive action. Unless we have factual evidence we should not question the basic idealism that brought these young men

¹³ Two episodes that I recall from personal experience – one direct, the other anecdotal – illustrate this point. The first was the experience of a freshly returned AFS chiding another returnee of the previous year for his pronunciation of 'money'; apparently a year of exposure to the Ethiopian milieu had made his American accent 'rusty'. Another anecdote highlights the question that was allegedly posed to an Americanized AFS returnee as to where his loyalties would lie were Ethiopia and the US to go to war. After pondering the matter for some time, he is supposed to have replied with an unmistakable American accent: 'I would truly find myself in a difficult position, because I have my Mom and Dad here and I have my Mom and Dad there!'

and women here – from the Land of Plenty’ (*N&V* 2nd series, I: 9). There is no better indication of the shifting attitudes of students towards the USA than the dramatically contrasting reactions that they had in a matter of a year to the visits of Robert Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey, the US vice-president under Lyndon B. Johnson. When the former came in 1967 with his mother for the inauguration of the Kennedy Library in the main campus, he was almost smothered after delivering a speech at Ras Makonnen Hall by an enthusiastic crowd that just wanted to touch him.

Even then, albeit not necessarily representative of the general mood, a leaflet was distributed railing against ‘the final indignity’ of the US donation of a new library, no doubt with a view to purging it of all progressive literature and filling it with ‘Yankee imperialist literature’. The writer took particular exception to the naming of the library after John F. Kennedy, ‘the greatest imperialist’, the butcher of Vietnam. He concluded: ‘Let us name the so called JFK library the LENIN LIBRARY’ (*IES CL* 2393/07/1/17; original emphasis). That was a sign of things to come. One year later, on 8 January 1968, when Hubert Humphrey was on campus, there was a strong protest culminating in the burning of an effigy of President Johnson, the US flag and a US dollar bill (*UR*, II: 15).

As elsewhere in the world, no other event contributed to the growth of anti-Americanism as much as the Vietnam War. True, by the time Robert Kennedy visited HSIU, the US escalation of the war in Vietnam had already commenced. So, his name rather than the state of the war probably explains the adulation that Ethiopian students showed him. In April 1966, Ambassador Korry had once again come into the limelight, writing to *News and Views* to take issue with an editorial of 4 April claiming that the USA was not prepared to talk with the Vietcong and that, contrary to the paper’s assertion that the latter controlled a preponderant proportion of Vietnam, they controlled only 1.5 per cent of the territory. Simultaneously, the president of NUEUS, Admassu Bezabeh, had written a letter expressing solidarity with the National Union of Vietnamese Students (Hanoi) in their ‘struggle against the United States War of Aggression’ and another one to Ambassador Korry demanding an end to the bombing of North Vietnam and the aggression in South Vietnam (*N&V* 2nd series, I: 9).

‘LAND TO THE TILLER’

It was almost inevitable that the issue of land reform would attract the attention of students sooner or later. After all, a number of them came from the countryside and had witnessed at first hand the inequities of the land-ownership system, particularly in the southern parts of the country, where tenancy was predominant. In some of the southern provinces, the proportion of tenants could go as high as 75 per cent. The question of tenancy also attracted nation-wide attention when a bill to regulate tenancy was presented to parliament in 1964/65. The reluctance of the landlord-packed

parliament to entertain even this mild palliative to a chronic social malady was one of the factors that contributed to the 'Land to the Tiller' demonstration university students staged on 25 February 1965.

The first clearly documented highlighting in student publications of the conditions of the peasantry, albeit in a literary format that could lend itself to hyperbole, appeared in June 1964. This was a short story entitled 'Gebre-Aregawi's Hopes' by Berhane Meskel Redda, second prize winner of a contest, which appeared in the literary magazine, *Something*. In a style reminiscent of Asba Haylu's graphic description of the lot of the *gabbar* in the early twentieth century (see Bahru 2002: 124), Berhane Meskel depicts the life of a typical peasant in Dabra Damo (northwestern Tigray), who had to toil over the monastery's *gult* land, give one-third of his produce in rent and pay from what is left land, health and education taxes. As if that were not enough, his fervent prayers notwithstanding, he has to endure the periodic invasion of locusts, which the priest explains is a result of his sins, such as not observing the mandatory fasting and working on holy (saints') days. His only hope lies in getting a share of the food aid coming from abroad. He makes the journey to Bizet (a village a few kilometres to the west) to that end, only to be robbed of what he got on his way back (*Something*, 3). A month later, in the July 1964 issue of *Tataq*, Gulelat Gebre Maryam from Moscow also identifies the appropriation of most of the land by powerful landlords as one of the major obstacles to Ethiopia's development (*Tataq*, Hamle 1956/July 1964).

It is not precisely clear how the idea of the 'Land to the Tiller' demonstration originated. Gebru Mersha attributes it to Tekalign Wolde Amanuel, a member of the radical core, who passed on the idea to Berhane Meskel (OR: 50).¹⁴ The March 1 issue of *News and Views* had a wide coverage of the demonstration, including a detailed report entitled 'What Solidarity!' by Abdul Mejid Hussein. The editorial, simply entitled 'Land to the Tiller', described the central place of land in Ethiopian society and argued that agriculture cannot be improved unless the prevalent system of land tenure was altered. It presented a critique of the tenancy bill that was then being discussed in parliament, pointing out that, far from considering abolishing tenancy altogether, it was merely concerned with reducing the rent that the tenant was forced to pay from 70 to 30 per cent. The bill, which was first presented to parliament in January 1963, actually proposed a reduction of the maximum rent from 75 to 50 per cent, a ban on all compulsory labour services by tenants and measures against their arbitrary eviction. As was to be expected, it provoked heated debate in both houses of Parliament. The Chamber of Deputies approved it with some amendments in June 1964. But, when it was presented to the Senate in November, seventy-four out of eighty-eight senators voted against it. Discussion at a joint meeting of both houses in February 1965 fizzled out when most of the MPs failed to return after the break (Bizuwork 1992: 92–106).

¹⁴ Gebru claims he was editor of *News and Views* at the time, while Berhane Meskel might have continued in the post of secretary-general of NUEUS that he had held in 1964/65 (Balsvik 1985: 318).

The demonstration was preceded by a general meeting in the dining hall, where the UCU president Baro Tumsa urged the assembled students that 'they should sacrifice themselves for the noble cause of raising the people's standard of living' (*N&V*, XI: 12). This was followed by a fiery speech by Berhane Meskel Redda urging the assembled students to rise up to the legacy of the gallant students who demonstrated in support of the 1960 coup (OI Tesfatsion). Fired up by these words, the students staged a demonstration – the second in their history – that took them first to the parliament, where they submitted a petition, and then across the city, including the two major commercial centres – Mercato and Piazza. The public viewed them with a mixture of enthusiastic approval and bemusement (Balsvik 1985: 150–1).

If the students had expected the endorsement of the faculty, let alone the university administration, for their bold undertaking, they were in for a surprise. A tense period of confrontation with the university authorities was to culminate in first the dissolution of the student union and then the suspension of the nine students mentioned above. Apparently with pressure from the government, the students were taken to task not so much for the public demonstration as for their unauthorized absence from class for half a day, causing wastage of resources. It was as if the administration and the faculty, unable to challenge the students on the moral justice of the demonstration, wished to penalize them on technical grounds. In fact, statements emanating from the university administration appeared to be designed to obfuscate the issue of land reform that had inspired the students in the first place. The committee selected for the purpose ruled that the activities of UCU and other student organs should be subject to staff supervision. This was something that the students were not prepared to accept. The executive council of UCU accordingly communicated the students' decision to the university administration on 10 March. The latter responded by banning the union and *News and Views* and closing the cafeteria, forcing students to go out onto the street for donations (*ibid.*: 152–3).

Sympathy for the UC students came from two unlikely sources: the College of Business Administration Union (CBAU), which had had a rather acrimonious relationship with UCU in the past, and the Student Affairs Committee (SAC) of the university. The UC students had made themselves vulnerable by failing to mobilize students of other colleges during their 25 February demonstration. The Engineering College students thus tended to adopt a 'serves-them-right' attitude. The CBAU paper, on the other hand, expressed sympathy for the UC students' cause and supported their rejection of the appointment of university supervisors. SAC too dropped the idea of supervisors for UCU. Probably emboldened by this favourable turn of events, the UC students called what was later characterized by the administration as an unauthorized meeting and elected the nine students cited above as the new executive council. This was what led to their suspension, presumably early in May 1965. A student protest march from the Arat Kilo campus to Seddest Kilo, seat of the university administration, was inter-

cepted by the police, who beat up the students and detained some of them (*ibid.*, 153–4).

On 14 May, the students took up their case to the palace, where the NUEUS president, Yacob Haile Mariam, read a petition to the emperor, explaining the circumstances of the clash with the police two days earlier and requesting pardon for the suspended students. The students shouted down the business vice-president of the university, Wubshet Dilnesahu, when he claimed that the suspension of the students was done in consultation with university staff (OI Tesfatsion). The emperor chastised the students for their lack of discipline and expressed his displeasure at their coming to the palace in such large numbers instead of sending their representatives, as he had earlier instructed them to do. He reiterated his deep commitment to the expansion of education, as could be evinced from his holding of the post of minister of education and chancellor of HSIU. He had discounted rumours that UC students were agitating other students because he was confident that they would come to him whenever they had any complaints. This last point might very well have been a veiled expression of his displeasure at the students resorting to a public demonstration on land reform instead of filing a petition with him. He finally rebuked them for prejudging the issue in the case of the suspended students, promising to take appropriate measures after investigating the issue (AZ, 7.9.57/15.5.65). However, the nine students remained suspended even after the petition.

This hard-line approach was echoed by the university president, Kasa Woldemariam. In a press conference on 16 May, he stated that the university's freedom was subject to national law and that it cannot afford the kind of anarchy prevailing in Latin-American universities. While the petitioning of the emperor a few days earlier was proper, the 'Land to the Tiller' demonstration was injurious to the university's principal mandate, i.e. education. He reiterated the university's policy of shifting the focus from the fundamental issue of land reform raised by the students to that of wastage of university resources as follows:

ስለጭሰኞችና ባለርስቶች ጉዳይ ተማሪዎቻችን ሠልፍ ቢያደርጉ ባያደርጉ ዩኒቨርሲቲው ደንታ የለውም፡፡ ሆኖም ተማሪዎች ያለፈቃድ በትምህርት ጊዜ ክፍላቸውን ትተው መሔድ የለባቸውም፡፡ እኛ ባንድ ሰዓት ጊዜ ውስጥ ከአንድ ሺህ 800 ብር በላይ የምናወጣ ስለሆነ፤ ይህ ገንዘብ ያለ አግባብ እንዲወጣ አንፈልግም፡፡ (AZ, 12.9.57/20.5.65)

The University does not care a bit whether students demonstrate or not on the issue of tenants and landlords. However, students should under no circumstances leave their classrooms without permission. We spend over Eth\$1800 per hour and we do not want that money to be squandered.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the 'Land to the Tiller' demonstration experience. The first is that it marked the second major confrontation of the students with the regime, the first being the rather

half-hearted demonstration in support of the 1960 coup. Whether they were fully aware of it or not, the students raised an issue that was fundamental to the regime. The second is that the Crocodiles appear to have played an important role in the identification of the issue and the agitation surrounding it. Perhaps emboldened by their success in mobilizing the students for a worthy cause, they took the fateful step of assuming power under circumstances that were suspect in the eyes of both the university administration and some of the students. The result was the suspension of nine of them. As Kiflu rightly points out: 'A lesson was learned from this incident. It was the last time that the leading militants exposed themselves as a group by standing for office' (Kiflu 1993: 39). Thereafter, they were to remain scrupulously underground (or under water!) and sought to further their agenda through front figures. Third, the government was clearly alarmed by the bold move of the students and this alarm was transmitted to the university administration. The latter, rather than challenge the moral high ground that the students had assumed by raising an issue of fundamental social significance, chose to take action against them on the technical ground of absenting themselves from classes. The tug-of-war that ensued between the students and the administration, the scuffles with the police, the detentions, the closing of the cafeteria and the students' quest for public donations to feed themselves – all of these were to be recurrent features of the student movement at home in subsequent years.

The 'Land to the Tiller' demonstration had reverberations among Ethiopian student unions abroad. Almost coinciding with the event in Addis, Hagos Gebre Yesus had written a damning critique of the regime's attempt at land reform, focusing on a paper entitled 'Tenancy Reform in Ethiopia'. He pointed the contradictory nature of the whole enterprise by arguing that the 'same government which bases its power upon the wealth of landlords undertakes its hypocritical obeisance to world public opinion by pretending to aim at abolishing landlords'. The recommendation of written tenancy contracts that was being adumbrated was little more than a 'written confirmation of his [the tenant's] oppression'. In such a context, all government-commissioned studies and reports were bound to be self-serving. 'When one desires to cut down a tree', Hagos concluded, 'one does not usually request the tree to supply the axe . . . Land reform must be preceded by reform of the government. Putting the cart before the horse is as illogical in politics as it is in transportation' (*Challenge*, V: 1).

It is therefore to be expected that the news of the 'Land to the Tiller' demonstration in Addis Ababa was enthusiastically received among Ethiopian students in North America. In the August 1965 issue of *Challenge*, the Ethiopian Students Association in North America (ESANA) hailed the 'Revolutionary Renaissance' that it augured. It welcomed the action of the Addis Ababa students not only for the fundamental social change that it advocated but also for the defiance of the system that it represented. This is how the editor of *Challenge* summed up the event:



3. March from Lund to Malmö (Sweden) after the 9th ESUE Congress, August 1969
(Courtesy of Yeraswork Admassie)

Ethiopia is a feudal society ruled by an absolute monarch. This statement fully comprehended conveys all that the educated Ethiopian need know or be concerned with . . . No Ethiopian who can know this can do anything less than his courageous compatriots before him. No Ethiopian should fail to see the spirit and purpose behind the student demonstrations in the streets of the capital city of the lion, and reactions to them. The determination of the younger generation of Ethiopians everywhere to become the vanguard of the approaching social revolution is clearly visible. (*Challenge*, V: 2)

These sentiments were echoed in the resolutions of the 13th Congress of ESANA held at Cambridge (Massachusetts) in September 1965. The Congress expressed its full support to the students' demand for 'real land reform' in their February demonstration in Addis Ababa and condemned the 'severe steps' taken by the regime, including the detention and suspension of students. Likewise, ESUE expressed its solidarity with the Addis Ababa students at its 5th Congress held in Vienna in the summer of 1965. The resolutions adopted at that Congress not only endorsed 'the principle of *Land to the Tiller*' but also condemned the repressive measures taken against the students in the wake of their public demonstration and called for the re-statement of the nine suspended students (*Challenge*, VI: 1).

It is not without reason that 1965 has generally come to be regarded as a turning point in the history of the student movement (cf. Andargachew 2000: 6). Barely two months after the 'Land to the Tiller' demonstration, an event occurred in North America that was to lead to a confrontation of the ESANA leadership with the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington DC. On 9 April, the Ethiopian ambassador, Berhanu Denqe, resigned in protest at the lack of reform in Ethiopia. On 24 June, the executive council of

ESANA issued a statement in support of his action. The embassy retaliated by instructing three members of the executive council – Hagos Gebre Yesus, Melesse Ayalew and Berhanu Abebe – to return to Ethiopia within a month or face revocation of their passports (Alem 1990: 98). The students responded by writing a letter to the Ethiopian government on 18 July requesting an explanation for their recall and registering their strong protest at the threat to cancel their passports. They followed this up with letters to 'Ethiopians anywhere', calling on them 'to protest the Ethiopian Government's practice of deliberate intimidation of students, calculated to silence their conscientious demands for the freedom of their people', and 'to National and International Student Organizations'. All the steps taken by the executive council were endorsed by both the ESUE and ESANA Congresses in August and September respectively (*Challenge*, V: 2; VI: 1).

A group of students based at the University of Utah tried to play a mediating role in the war of nerves between the ESANA Executive Committee (ExC) and the Government, more specifically its embassy in Washington DC. In a letter dated 4 August 1965 and addressed to the Ethiopian Embassy, this group of eight students,¹⁵ recalling the meeting that it had had with the educational attaché during his recent visit to Salt Lake City, followed up on their verbal request to the Ethiopian government to reconsider the measure it had taken against the ESANA leadership. Censure of the leadership, if any was required, was the sole prerogative of the ESANA General Assembly, which was due to be called soon thereafter. Any other measure is an infringement of the freedom of expression. The group at the same time called on executive committee members of ESANA to desist from making any further statements until the convening of the General Assembly (IES CL 2375/03/3/9.12). It is of some significance that two of the students, Andreas Eshete and Bekele Tegegn, were to be the main figures behind the drafting of what came to be known as the 'Utah Paper', a document calling for the formation of a political organization that was submitted to the ESANA Congress in August 1965 (see Chapter 7: 250 for details).

The resolutions of the 1965 ESUE and ESANA Congresses were also unprecedented not only by the radicalism of their tone but by the breadth of national and international issues they addressed. Thus, the ESUE Congress passed resolutions on such international issues as colonialism, neo-colonialism, apartheid and all forms of racial discrimination, the OAU, world peace and Vietnam. On national politics, it expressed its solidarity with both the students in Addis Ababa and those in North America in their confrontation with the government, called on 'all educated Ethiopians [to] open their eyes and assume their duties and responsibilities', demanded the removal of such vestiges of US presence as the Military Assistance Advisory Group, the Peace Corps and 'the American Radio Station' (presumably at Kagnew) and the Mapping Institute. Further, it underlined the

¹⁵ The students, as originally listed (apparently in Amharic alphabetical order), were: Habtemariam Marcos, Bekele Tegegn, Tekie Fessehazion, Haile Wolde Michael, Negussay Ayele, Assefa Mehretu, Andreas Eshete and Daniel Gemechu.

importance of land reform to free the people from the 'extortion and exploitation of the idle who wax fat at the expense of those who till the land'. The Congress also passed resolutions on the separation of church and state, the promotion of internal and external trade, the regulation of the growing number of private schools and the appointment of a politically independent president for HSIU (as recorded in *Challenge*, VI: 1).

The resolutions of the 13th Congress of ESANA were not as elaborate, particularly with regard to international issues. But they went even further than the ESUE resolutions in calling for regime change, as, under what it called 'this fettering dictatorship', Ethiopia 'cannot realize its full social and economic potential'. The latter part of the ESUE resolutions, by contrast, had stopped short of such a revolutionary step, making instead specific recommendations to the government. The ESANA Congress also called not only for the respect of civil rights and liberties but also for the replacement of 'absolute monarchy . . . by a democratically instituted government'. It demanded, as the ESUE Congress had done, not only for the separation of church and state but also for the expropriation of 'the large proportion of Ethiopia's arable land' that the church controls. It further called for the undertaking of a 'thorough-going land reform', the allocation of a higher budget for the expansion of education, and the total eradication of literacy '*within less than a decade*' (original emphasis). A section of the resolutions were concerned with the student movement, appreciating the struggles of Addis Ababa students in February and May 1965 and condemning the repressive measures that the government had taken (*ibid.*).

Although students came out with the powerful slogan of 'Land to the Tiller' in 1965, it was not until 1970 that any serious study of the land problem in Ethiopia was attempted by any of the student organizations. In its July 1970 issue, the ESUNA organ, *Challenge*, came up with a special issue dedicated to 'The Agrarian Question in Ethiopia'. It contained two studies by Haile Menkerios and Dessalegn Rahmato, entitled, respectively, 'The Present System of Land Tenure in Ethiopia' and 'Conditions of the Ethiopian Peasantry'. Both studies made extensive use of the provincial land tenure surveys undertaken by the Ministry of Land Reform Administration, the only meaningful outcome of the government's half-hearted engagement of the issue of land reform. Haile identified two principal systems of land tenure in northern Ethiopia – the extended family system, which was the predominant feature, and the village system, which was found largely in the Eritrean highlands. The first was based on kinship, the latter on collective residence. Southern Ethiopia, by contrast, was characterized by large-scale private ownership, extensive government holdings and widespread tenancy. He concluded his analysis by drawing attention to the multiplicity of tenure and the problem that this posed, and the drawbacks of the communal tenure system prevalent in northern Ethiopia, notably the problem of fragmentation and the insecurity of tenure. But the problems in northern Ethiopia paled in comparison with those in southern Ethiopia, where 'One does not talk about a system of land tenure but a system of slavery when not only land but also

the services of people are allotted to certain individuals – gult owners’ (*Challenge*, X: 2).

Dessalegn identified two ‘modes of production’ in his article: ‘feudal’ and ‘commercial agriculture’, the latter attesting to the inroads that capitalist production had been making into the agrarian economy. He refers to Marc Bloch, Paul Sweezy and Maurice Dobb to define the concept of feudalism and concludes that ‘the structure of Ethiopian feudalism is, in many respects, almost identical with that of medieval Europe’. Within this theoretical framework, he examines in more detail the manifestations of tenancy, Ethiopia’s version of serfdom, in the various provinces, giving figures (compiled from the Ministry of Land Reform surveys cited above) for the mode of rent payment and the percentage of absentee landlords. He identifies three major classes in rural Ethiopia: the large land-owning aristocracy, the local gentry and the peasantry. The last ekes out a life of impoverishment and insecurity, being ‘the first to suffer and the last to recover’ from any economic hazard. In general, lulled by the teachings of the church, he curses his fate for his condition. In extreme circumstances, however, he rises in rebellion, as happened in Tigray, Gojjam and Bale. Dessalegn concludes his analysis by asserting that only systemic change, not such ‘facile measures’ as a better regulatory environment or grants from government-owned land, could bring about a fundamental solution to the problem of the peasantry. ‘In this connection’, he concludes, ‘the slogan LAND TO THE TILLER is indeed subversive’ (*ibid.*).

This line of relatively more serious investigation of Ethiopian society was continued in 1971. The November issue of *Challenge* featured an article by Eshetu Chole, who was doing his doctorate at the University of Syracuse at the time, on ‘The Mode of Production in Ethiopia and the Realities thereof’. After a textbook-like introductory section on the concept of mode of production and the two principal modes of production (feudalism and capitalism), Eshetu embarks on a detailed discussion of what he calls the economic structure in Ethiopia, identifying two primary forms of agriculture – subsistence and commercial. A small, young and largely foreign-dominated industrial sector characterized the non-agrarian economy. He sums up his brief survey of the Ethiopian economy by concluding that ‘*the dominant mode of production in Ethiopia is feudalism existing side by side with an embryonic capitalism that has . . . little prospect of development*’ (original emphasis). The last section of the article is devoted to the validation of six theses arguing the alliance of feudalism and imperialism, the stagnant nature of the Ethiopian economy, the exploitative and unjust nature of contemporary Ethiopian society, the rampancy of repression and the imperative of socialism (*Challenge*, XII: 1).

Whatever the inadequacies of these articles, they represent serious attempts to go into the fundamentals of the situation that gave rise to the call of ‘Land to the Tiller’. They were of course written with the ideological underpinnings of the time. But some empirical research also gave their arguments some weight. Above all, they were clear evidence

of the fact that the land question, once triggered in 1965, was to remain an important preoccupation of the Ethiopian student movement, until it found its resolution in the rural land nationalization proclamation of March 1975.

IDEOLOGY AND CULTURE

The Ethiopian student movement was to have eventually a distinctively Marxist-Leninist ideology, ideology that went on to shape the character of the Ethiopian revolution that erupted in 1974. But the road to the adoption of that ideological trademark was long and bumpy. In the early 1960s, as events organized by the UCU Debating Society showed, there was a perceptible ambivalence about western style democracy, let alone communism. Thus, an inter-collegiate oratorical contest in mid-1961 had as its topic: 'Capitalism and Communism have to exist together if man is to make rapid progress towards his aspirations'. The contestants were reportedly 'intellectuals who are not biased through political involvement'. The contest was won by Ba'alu Girma, later to evolve as a prominent journalist and writer (*N&V*, IV: 30). In November of the same year, there was another debate on the topic: 'Western Democracy cannot exist in Africa at present'. The proponents, Stanley Gulavi and Tefera Wolde Semait, won by fifty-three votes to forty-eight (*N&V*, V: 10). Of course these results might as well reflect the strength of the debaters rather than the validity or otherwise of the proposition. But that they were put forward is in itself an indication of the climate of opinion.

In early 1962, the distaste for communism was expressed emphatically when Gebreselassie Gebre Mariam won the Board of Governors' trophy in an oratorical contest by opposing the motion 'That Africa's true salvation depends on communism'. The opponent hammered on the anti-religious character of communism and its reduction of the individual to the level of a mere agent. Asked by many if he was a communist, the proponent of the motion, Paulos Milkias, had this to say in a letter to the Editor of *News and Views*: 'I am not a communist and I do not believe in communism. I supported the motion only because I thought all the speakers would oppose it, . . . as a result of which the same points would be repeated over and over again, thus making the whole thing drab' (*N&V*, V: 20). Fanuel Deggie, who was to run for president of MCSU with Paulos in 1965, had an even more disturbing experience when he discovered a few months later that he was not allowed to read 'a communist periodical . . . which comes weekly to the library'. The librarian confessed to being apprehensive of the harsh actions that would be taken against him if he gave access to it. The frustrated reader decried the measure thus: 'What does this mean? Do those people, whoever they are, who brought this idea, take us for babies who cannot make up their minds? Do they not know the existence of a Russian library from where we can borrow books on communism?' (*N&V*, V: 31).

While students could indeed have free access to books on communism at the Russian Library, it was also common knowledge that those who did frequent that establishment were often reported to the government security agency and were sometimes summoned for questioning. This was to be the fate of a number of the 'Crocodiles', who surfaced in 1964 as the first professedly Marxist group within the student movement. More than any other group, they were to be responsible for the dissemination of Marxist ideas among the student body in the second half of the 1960s. This small nucleus expanded to include an ever growing number of adherents, so much so that, by the end of the decade or at least the beginning of the next, Marxism-Leninism had come to be the dominant ideology of the student movement both at home and abroad.

An interesting taxonomy of university students with respect to their ideological orientation was provided by Alemseged Tesfai towards the end of 1965, almost a year after the 'Land to the Tiller' demonstration. To begin with, the writer disputed the claim that there were ideological differences among students, for ideology presupposes 'a defined aim, an objective that one has to strive hard to achieve, regardless of consequences'. Instead, he preferred to divide students into four categories: the 'reasonables', the 'radicals', the 'jolly-jacks' and the 'neutralists'. The first were distinguished by their advocacy of 'the peaceful solution of problems and for a tactful approach to situations'. The radicals, by contrast, believed that 'progress can only be achieved through action' and preferred 'to act first and let events take their course'.¹⁶ The jolly-jacks, who had a predilection for American slang,¹⁷ were engrossed in topics that 'range from dirty jokes to sex and from sex to philosophy', while the neutralists 'do not even care to know what happens and when it happens' (N&V, 2nd series, I: 1).

If there was one distinct orientation that most students had in the mid-1960s, it was clearly nationalist. In April 1966, a freshman, Haile Mariam Goshu, defined it as 'Ethiopianism', a patriotism inspired by the vision of Tewodros and the diplomacy of Menilek. He saw that creed being threatened by 'Communists and Americans'. He had no place for either of them in Ethiopia and urged that 'We should nip these ideologies in the bud, or else we will see colonialism repeated in another form, camouflaged by hundreds of handshakes and gifts' (N&V, 2nd series, I: 9). Even the third issue of *Struggle*, organ of the militant University Students Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA), published in October 1967 in the popular 'That will be the day' column an entry that eagerly awaited the day when 'the University is not flooded by words ending with "ISM"'. It noted parenthetically, however, that 'NATIONALISM' was an exception (*Struggle*, I: 3)!

If 1965, when students came out on to the street with the revolutionary slogan of 'Land to the Tiller', is generally regarded as a turning point in the history of the student movement, then 1967 could be viewed as marking

¹⁶ One is reminded here of Tilahun Gizaw's famous conclusion to his peroration during the Rhodesia demonstration of 1968: 'After that, nature will take its own course'. See below: 151.

¹⁷ This was clearly a reference to the AFS returnees.

a radical shift in student conviction in the inevitability of revolution. And this was the case among students both at home and abroad. A *Tataq* editorial of *Ter* 1959 EC (January 1967) ushered in this new chapter with a clarion call for struggle to bring about the new Ethiopia. Addressing the emperor in the third person singular (generally regarded as a *lèse majesté* when expressed in Amharic), it expounded in the following, almost prophetic, terms the view that he could either make the necessary change or condemn himself and his dynasty to oblivion:

በኢትዮጵያ ሰማይ ላይ ጥቁር ደመና ያንዣብባል፡፡ እንግዲህ የሚጥለው ዶፍ ሰብአትነትን ለማጥፋት የሚላክ ሳይሆን በኢትዮጵያ ሠርቶአደር ሕዝብ ጫንቃ ላይ የሚኖሩትን ጌቶች ከነጌታቸው ጠራርጎ የሚወስድ ጎርፍ መሆኑን መገንዘብ ያሻል፡፡ ይህን አስቃቂ የመዐት ጊዜ ከመምጣት ሊያስቀረው የሚችል የንጉሠ ነገሥቱ በጎ ፈቃድ ብቻ ነበር፡፡ ንጉሠ ነገሥቱ ይህን በጎ ፈቃድ በግልጽ ለማሳየት ከፈለገና የሚገባውንም ክብርና ምስጋና ለማግኘት ምኞቱ ከሆነ ሥልጣኑን በሙሉ ለሕዝቡ አስረክቦ እንዲሰናበት እንጠይቀዋለን፡፡ ይህ በአውሮፓ የሚገኙ ተማሪዎች ብቻ ሳይሆን በኢትዮጵያና በዓለም ተሰራጭተው የሚገኙ ተማሪዎችና የአገራችን ሠርቶአደር ሕዝብ ምኞት ነው፡፡ ንጉሠ ነገሥቱ የተጠየቀውን በቶሎ ካልፈጸመ በሕዝባችን ላይ ለሚደርስበት መከራ ሃላፊው እርሱ ከመሆኑ በላይ ዙፋኑን ነገሥታት ከኢትዮጵያ ጨርሰው እንዲጠፉ ይመቱበቃ የፈረደባቸው ንጉሠ ነገሥቱ ራሱ መሆኑን ቢገነዘበው መልካም ነው፡፡ (*Tataq, Ter* 1959/January 1967)

A dark cloud is hovering over the Ethiopian skies. It is incumbent on one to realize that the downpour that is pending is not intended to wipe away the sinners of Babylon but rather both the lords who are living on the shoulders of the Ethiopian working masses and their lord. Only the goodwill of the emperor could prevent these impending horrendous times. If he is prepared to exercise this goodwill and earn the accolade and gratitude that he deserves, we demand that he hand over all his powers to the people. This is the wish not only of Ethiopian students in Europe but also of all students in Ethiopia and all over the world as well as that of the Ethiopian working masses. If he does not accede to this demand immediately, the emperor should realize that not only would he be held responsible for the great suffering that our people will face but it would also mean that he has pronounced the death sentence on the throne and his dynasty.

The Congresses of both ESUE and ESANA in the same year also underscored this fundamental shift in student perception. The 15th Congress of ESANA, which was held on 25–31 August 1967 in Bloomington, Indiana, has been seen in retrospect as marking the adoption of a clearly anti-feudal and anti-imperialist line by the organization. In its resolutions, the Congress declared unequivocally that ‘oppression, poverty, disease, illiteracy, feudalism and imperialism cannot be eradicated from Ethiopia without a total liquidation of the existing system’. The ‘Democratic People’s Government of Ethiopia’ that is bound to replace that system would be characterized by the ‘socialization of land’ and collective ownership of industries as well as the full separation of church and state. It also declared itself to be, along with other Ethiopian student organizations both outside and inside the country as well as ‘the entire youth of Ethiopia . . . a full partisan of this revolution in Ethiopia’. Interestingly enough, though, in view of the national question debate that was to dominate the student

movement two years later, it called for actively combating ‘all influences of tribalism, factionalism, regionalism’ and for abolishing ‘group identification along linguistic lines while developing a truly national language enriched by a systematic and scientific amalgamation of the rich languages and dialects of the people of Ethiopia’ (IES CL 2395/03/1.18).

These first indications of the anti-feudal and anti-imperialist direction of the student movement were to be elaborated further in subsequent years until it became a credo. One such elaboration was provided in a *Tataq* editorial of *Hamle* 1961 EC (July 1969) entitled ‘*Tsara balabat, tsara imperialist*’ (‘Anti-feudal, anti-imperialist’).¹⁸ The rather elaborate nine-page editorial delineates the characteristics of feudal and imperialist exploitation in Ethiopia. It argues that *balabat* rule had lost its redeeming features of ensuring law and order and has been transformed into one of brazen exploitation. The *balabat* of today do not have the valour of their predecessors, valour that had safeguarded the country’s independence. Likewise, the progressive Tafari had been replaced by the decadent Haile Sellassie. With regard to imperialism, the neat division of labour that it had introduced, whereby developing countries produce raw materials and industrialized countries produce manufactured goods, had made countries like Ethiopia so dependent that they would die from influenza when the advanced countries caught cold. The solution for this predicament was clear:

ስለዚህ በፈውዳሊዝምና በኢምፔሪያሊዝም መቃብር ላይ የሁላችን የሆነች ህዝባዊት ኢትዮጵያን ለመመስረት ኢትዮጵያውያን የሆንን ሁሉ እናኝ ከማይሞሉት ጨቋኞችና ደጋፊዎቻቸው በቀር በአንድ የትግል ግንባር ውስጥ ተሰብስበንና ተደራጅተን በአንድነት መራመድ አለብን፡፡ (*Tataq*, *Hamle* 1961/July 1969)

. . . in order, therefore, to build on the grave of feudalism and imperialism a people’s Ethiopia that belongs to us all, all Ethiopians, minus the handful of oppressors and their supporters, should rally behind a common front and march together.

On the home front, USUAA’s organ, *Struggle*, began to point out the thorny path that lay ahead. An Amharic editorial entitled ‘Trial’ (*Fatana*) that appeared in the October 31 (1967) issue had the following sombre words of warning:

እንደ መና ጠዋቱ የዘነበባቸውን ጥቂቶችን ወደ ዳር ትተን ስንመለከት ያለመከራ ፀጋ የሚገኝበት መንገድ ከቶ አይታየንም፤ አቋራጭ ወይንም ስርጥ መንገድ የለውም፡፡ መንገዱ ምንጊዜም በመከራ አጋም የታጠረ መሆኑን ከልባችን ልንጥፈው ይገባል፡፡ (*Struggle*, I: 3)

Leaving aside the few who have been blessed from the start, there is no other road to bliss except through tribulation; there just is no shortcut. We should all bear in mind that that path is always strewn with thorns of suffering.

¹⁸ The term *balabat* is a poor equivalent for ‘feudal’; most student writings preferred to use the English word rather than seek an Amharic equivalent, as was even more the case with ‘imperialist’. The editorial is actually forced to use the word ‘feudalism’ later in the text.

Thus, the agenda was set: revolutionary armed struggle. In early March 1968, some four months after the above lines were penned down, Tesfaye (Tesfu) Kidane, one of the radicals who later joined EPLF, wrote on 'The Principles and Objectives of Guerrilla Warfare', in effect paraphrasing the famous work on the subject by General Giap, the military leader of the Vietnamese armed struggle against first the French and then the Americans (*Struggle*, II: 3). By late 1969, after students had demonstrated their prowess in the struggle with the regime and achieved almost all their demands, including the release of the students who had been sentenced to five years in prison, and after students had even dared to hijack a plane, confidence had soared unbound. 'The revolutionary Ethiopian student movement', *Struggle* wrote, 'has reached such a high level of militancy and consciousness that it has proved to itself and to the oppressed classes that it is capable of mobilizing the actual and potential revolutionary forces in Ethiopia' (*Struggle*, V: 2). The Amharic editorial of the same issue underscored the inexorable of violence:

የተጨቆነና የተበዘበዘ ሕዝብ ማመጽ፡ ብረት ማንግት፡ ግዴታው ነው፡፡ . . . እስከ ዛሬ ከታሪክ እንደተመለከትነው አመጽ ወይም ሃይል አሮጌው ሕብረተሰብ አዲስ ሕብረተሰብ ሊገኝልላል ሲያምጥ የሚደርስለት ፍቱን አዋላጅ ነው፡፡ . . . ነጻነት አይለገስም፡ ነጻነት መና አይደለም፡፡ በጾም በጸሎት፡ በምላላ (ምህላ?) ከሰማይ አይቀበሉትም፡፡ ለነጻነት ይታገሉለታል፡፡ በሀብትም በሕይወትም መስዋዕት ይደረግበታል፡፡ ለብዙ ጊዜ የቆየ የደም ድልድይ ይሰናዳለታል፡፡ ለነጻነት መታገል ለመኖርና ላለመኖር መታገል ነው፡፡ በአንድ ትውልድ ብቻ አይወሰንም፡፡

It is the duty of oppressed and exploited people to rise up in arms. As we have observed in history, violence is the midwife that is on hand to deliver a new society from the womb of the old. Freedom is not granted, it is not a manna that comes down from the sky through prayers and supplication. One has to struggle for freedom. One has to sacrifice one's wealth and life for it . . . To fight for freedom is a matter of to be or not to be. Nor is such struggle confined to one generation; it goes from one generation to the next.

By 1970, uneasy at the growing stridency of the home movement, the leadership abroad had started to sound a note of caution, underlining the protracted nature of the struggle. Victory, the argument ran, was not to be achieved overnight but was to ensue only after long and patient organizational work among the broad masses. Thus, in its January 1970 (*Ter* 1962) issue, *Tataq* published a paper presented at the 9th ESUE Congress outlining the tasks of students and intellectuals and, more importantly, the manner of executing those tasks. The principal injunction was to join the working masses, learn from them and then teach them and strive for the creation of vanguard anti-feudal and anti-imperialist organizations. This was indeed to be the motto of *Ma'ison*, the leftist organization that has already been set up clandestinely by the ESUE leaders by this time but was to surface only some five years later.

An even more polemical piece appeared in *Challenge* in July 1971 against the backdrop of the rancorous debate on the national question. Entitled 'Mass Struggle versus Focoism' and authored by 'Rejjim Gouzo' (obviously

a pseudonym, Amharic for 'Long Journey'), it was an attack on the 'sectarian ideology of virtual anarchism and infantile adventurism' that was allegedly rearing its head within the ranks of the student movement. Tracing the genesis of this focoist tendency to Régis Debray's *Revolution in the Revolution*, it saw it as a shortcut preferred by its adherents to the arduous task of organizing and mobilizing the masses. 'Revolutionary struggle is mainly and primarily a political struggle,' the paper concluded, stressing that the Ethiopian student movement had not even graduated to the level of a youth movement (*Challenge*, XI: 2; original emphasis). The term 'rejjim guzo' was to have a long lease of life, managing to lend its name to one of the two broad tendencies in the student and leftist movement, 'rejjim guzoism', as opposed to the antithetical tendency of 'acher guzoism' (from *acher guzo* or 'short journey').¹⁹

The adoption of an anti-feudal and anti-imperialist stand necessitated an investigation of the two concepts of feudalism and imperialism. Student writings on the latter tended to be a bit more elaborate than those on the former, in part a reflection of the available literature. A very early attempt to grapple with the concept of feudalism in general appeared in *Tataq* in March 1964. An article by Gulelat Gebre Maryam recapped the conventional Marxist perception of feudalism as the third stage in human development, after 'savagery' and the slave-owning system. This was followed by a graphic description of feudal injustice, identifying the church and the mosque as the two pillars of the feudal order. The only specific reference to Ethiopia came in its selection as one of four examples of feudal society in Africa and the Arab world, Iran, Morocco and Saudi Arabia being the other three. Interestingly enough, one year before the famous 'Land to the Tiller' demonstration in Addis Ababa, the article called on these regimes to redistribute land to the tillers 'as soon as possible' (*Tataq, Magabit* 1956 – March 1964).

A more elaborate and Ethiopia-focused examination of feudalism was presented as a commission report at the 9th Congress of ESUE in 1969. The commission, which was actually designated to investigate the state of industry and trade, attributed the low level of the country's industrial development to the feudal character of the economy. Relying heavily on Pierre Jalée's *Pillage of the Third World*, the report emphasized the uneven nature of the relationship between the 'exploited' and the 'imperialist' countries. Focusing on the Ethiopian situation, it highlighted the foreign provenance of whatever industrialization had taken place in the country, mostly after 1950. What was dubbed 'national' capital was actually owned by Armenians and Greeks. The resolution that was finally adopted at the Congress identified the feudal order as the root of the entire problem:

ለዚህ ሁሉ ብዝሃና ጭቆና መሠረቱ የፈውዳሉ ሥርዓት ነው... : ስለዚህ ጊዜያዊው ቀዳማዊ ተግባር ያሁኑ ሥርዓት ከኢትዮጵያ የሚነቀልበትን ዘዴ መፈለግ መሆን አለበት : በኢንዱስትሪም ሆነ በእርሻ መሠረታዊ ለውጥ ለማምጣት ቀዳማዊ ተግባር መሆን ያለበት የሠራተኛና የገበሬ ተጋድሎ በአንድነት እንዲቀናበርና ፀረፈውዳሊስት-ፀረኢምፔሪያሊስት በሆነ ዓላማ ሥር እንዲመራ ማድረግ ነው : (Tataq, Teqemt 1962/October 1969; original emphasis)

¹⁹ Note also the title of Andargachew's history of *Ma'ison: Ba'acher Yataqacha Rajjem Guzo* ('A Long Journey Cut Short').

At the root of all this exploitation and oppression is the feudal system. Therefore, the primary task of the moment is searching for ways to eradicate the current system from Ethiopia. To bring about fundamental change in both the industrial and agricultural spheres, the primary task should be to co-ordinate the struggle of the workers and peasants under an anti-feudal and anti-imperialist banner.

The close linkage of feudalism and imperialism was emphasized in more than one student writing. Thus, the *Tataq* editorial of July 1969 cited above pointed out the rapacious character that the feudal order had assumed since it allied with imperialism. While it appreciated the progressive nature of the efforts of Emperor Tewodros and the young Tafari Makonnen (the future Emperor Haile Sellassie) to curtail the power of feudal lords, it argued that the system had degenerated into a repressive and exploitative one once that positive mission had been accomplished. The landlord, who used to partake of the joys and sorrows of the peasant, has distanced himself once he had come to acquire new tastes through exposure to foreign (i.e. imperialist) influence; only the colour of his skin still united him with the peasant. Imperialism itself has been milking the country dry through the fictitious formula of 'the comparative cost theory', whereby developing countries like Ethiopia will produce raw materials and the developed world would produce manufactured goods. But, this so-called division of labour has only resulted in a growing imbalance of trade in favour of the industrial countries. In a line reminiscent of Gebre Heywet Baykadagn (Bahru 2002: 113), the editorial demonstrated this growing imbalance by pointing out that while only twenty sacks of coffee were needed to purchase a car thirty years ago, not even two hundred sacks will suffice at the time of writing (*Tataq*, Hamle 1961/July 1969).

The North American contingent of the student movement made its first contribution to this investigation of imperialism, and particularly of US imperialism, in Ethiopia with a compilation of facts and figures entitled 'A Preliminary Survey of American Economic Penetration in Ethiopia'; it was presented at the 15th ESANA Congress held in Bloomington (Indiana) on 25–31 August, 1967. This was a collection of extracts from various publications on Ethiopia, notably *The Middle East and North Africa*, *The New York Times*, *The Times*, and *The Washington Post*. Apart from the overwhelming US military presence in Ethiopia, the excerpts actually say little about American economic penetration. This underscores a general weak point of student writings on US imperialism. Objective examination of the situation at the time shows that US capital had scarcely penetrated the Ethiopian economy. Their influence in Ethiopia was largely confined to the politico-military and cultural spheres. But, true to Marxist tradition, students had to look for economic penetration even where it was not evident. Only then can the characterization of the country as 'semi-feudal' and 'semi-colonial' be validated, as it were. It is therefore a matter of little surprise that the compilation concludes with a general survey of Western economic domination of the Third World rather than any specific elucidation of the Ethiopian situation. As if aware of this gap, the essay concludes by insisting that 'Feudal

and semi-colonial Ethiopia cannot be an exception' (ESANA 15th Congress Proceedings: 30).

Perhaps the most detailed and relatively well-researched study of imperialism that appeared in a student publication was the special issue of *Challenge* that appeared in January 1971 and was exclusively dedicated to the subject.²⁰ It featured the papers prepared for the 18th Congress of ESUNA in the summer of 1970. The editorial argued that, while Ethiopians should be legitimately proud of their country's glorious anti-imperialist past, as evidenced in the victory over Italian colonialism at the Battle of Adwa in 1896 and the patriotic resistance to the Fascist occupation of 1936–41, they should be careful to distance themselves from the excessive glorification of that record by the ruling class to legitimize its rule. An article by Aklog Birara entitled 'Notes on European Imperialism in Ethiopia' gave a sketch of European encroachment on Ethiopia from the occupation of Assab in 1869 to the Fascist invasion of 1935.²¹ The second article, by Wondwossen Hailu, traced the origins of US imperialism on the basis of the works of the first American official envoy to Ethiopia, Robert Skinner, and US archival material. Ethiopia is identified as 'one of the earliest instances of neo-colonialism as a means of economic and political control'. US economic penetration that began with the Skinner Mission in 1903 culminated in the establishment of a hegemonic position following the departure of the British from Eritrea and the federation of that former Italian colony to Ethiopia in 1952. US penetration was facilitated by the readiness of the Ethiopian ruling class to embrace it, as the Americans were perceived as an ally against the traditional colonialist powers (*Challenge*, XI: 1).

The longest piece in the collection dealt with the contemporary situation and was prepared by the New York Chapter of ESUNA. It treated the subject under three categories: economic, political and military, and educational and cultural. The economic aspect was purportedly manifested in agro-industrial enterprises, foreign (especially US) investment, foreign trade, and aid. The pivotal instrument in the politico-military realm was the Ethio-US Treaty of 1953. The third aspect, the educational-cultural, was seen through the foreign domination of the educational system and what it called cultural imperialism, 'the suppression of national culture and the superimposition of foreign culture', most evident in urban centres like Addis Ababa. Ethiopian returnees from abroad, even more than American Peace Corps volunteers, served as agents of such foreign cultural penetration (*ibid.*).

Even if these analyses of imperialism by Ethiopian student organizations abroad admittedly were far from flawless, they represented quite

²⁰ The August 1971 issue of *Challenge* had the rather misleading title of 'Imperialism and National Liberation in Ethiopia'. But most of the articles have little to do with Ethiopia, or imperialism as a concept for that matter (*Challenge*, XI: 3).

²¹ Based largely on two works (Emile Burns' *Ethiopia and Italy* and George W. Baer's *The Coming of the Italian-Ethiopian War*), the article dates the Italian acquisition of Eritrea to 1882, apparently on the basis of the Italian government takeover of the port of Assab from the private company that had purchased it in 1869. But, it was actually the Italian occupation of the port of Massawa in 1885 that led to the creation of the colony of Eritrea, which was officially declared in 1890.

an advance on the perceptions of imperialism on the home front. As the first secretary-general of USUAA, Hailu Ayele, testified, there was even a certain diffidence among students inside the country about the use of the term 'imperialism' until the 6th Congress of NUEUS in March 1967 for fear of offending the powers that be (Bahru 2010: 53–54). The resolutions of that Congress included brief descriptions of imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism, as if they were three distinct categories (*Struggle*, 1:3). Yohannes Berhane, a USUAA militant, wrote a somewhat belated assessment of the resolutions in the 31 October issue of *Struggle*. He praised 'the united stand against certain sectarian movements based on Anti-Nationalism and trying to dismantle the Motherland' and the resolutions' condemnation of the American Peace Corps Program. While he hailed the resolutions as 'landmarks in the history of the Ethiopian Youth Movement', he found the discussion of the national issue inadequate, conceding, however: 'do circumstances allow that? One could not very well chew what one cannot swallow' (*Struggle*, 1: 3).

Even after 1967, student leaders at home found it necessary to dilute the rather strident tracts that were sent them from their colleagues in North America, particularly those regarding the sovereign, as they were more sensitive to the ire that such language could cause and the consequences it could have for them. Thus, in 1968, as they prepared to stage protests during the visit of US Vice-President Hubert Humphrey to Ethiopia, USUAA leaders had to expunge some critical passages from an ESANA article on US imperialism in Ethiopia (Bahru 2010: 40). Curiously enough, after 1969, the situation was reversed as the home front increasingly became more strident and the foreign component more cautious.

It is not easy to identify the point in time when the student movement adopted the Marxist-Leninist ideology that was to be its hallmark. Like all such developments, it probably has to be seen as a process rather than as a sudden development. In general, though, the late 1960s appear to be the period when the decisive shift appears to have been made. Even then, as Dessalegn Rahmato recalls, this was something that was largely confined to the leadership and the other most active members of the student unions (Bahru 2010: 38–39). But there was a conscious effort to spread the word, as it were, among the rank and file through study groups or circles. These became a common feature of student activists in both North America and Europe. Inside the country, too, it was a common development of the early 1970s. The repression of 1969 could be said to have had two divergent consequences: exodus abroad and a more clandestine form of organization at home. Indeed, it was from these study circles that the leftist organizations, such as Abyot and Natsanat, subsequently emerged. Abyot and Natsanat subsequently merged with the Ethiopian People's Liberation Organization (EPLO) to form the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP).

ESANA probably went further than most in institutionalizing this system of political education, not to say indoctrination, through its famous Political Education Program (PEP). According to its president, Alem Habtu, this was initiated at the 16th Congress of the organization in 1968, with

Dessalegn Rahmato as the principal coordinator of the Program (Bahru 2010: 66). This is indeed confirmed by the resolutions of that Congress, which included a recommendation for the preparation of a reading list or a 'bibliography of revolutionary ideology'. A look at one such bibliography, prepared in August 1969, shows a motley mixture of predominantly radical literature. This included Western liberals like René Dumont, William Hinton, Felix Greene and Edgar Snow; African radical leaders like Kwame Nkrumah; African-American and African-Caribbean radicals like Malcolm X, C.L.R. James and Frantz Fanon; the New Left radicals like Andrey Gunder Frank, Régis Debray, and Leo Huberman and Paul Sweezy; works on Russian history and on and by Stalin, including the celebrated trilogy on the Soviet leader by Isaac Deutscher; as well as the Marxist classics, including works of Marx and Engels, Lenin, Mao and Giap. This was no mere listing of books but rather an annotated bibliography, even if most of them were highly recommended or labelled as 'essential reading'.

The Program continued well into the 1970s. In January 1976, ESUNA – affiliated with the World Wide Federation of Ethiopian Students (WWFES) – published a guideline consisting of twenty-seven lessons (with corresponding required reading), including introduction to Marxism, class and class struggle, the state, the rise and development of capitalism, neo-colonialism, imperialism in Ethiopia, the agrarian, national and woman question in Ethiopia, history of revolution, the national democratic revolution in Ethiopia, people's war and people's army, the party, the EPRP and the 'provisional popular government' slogan (IES CL 2395/03/3/14).

What prompted the introduction of PEP was probably the low level of political consciousness of the majority of the ESANA membership. This was painfully clear from the resolutions of ESANA's 15th Congress (1967). While continuing the tradition of radical opposition to the regime started in 1965 and its dedication to 'the total liquidation of the existing system', the Congress nonetheless expressed dismay at the low level of political consciousness of its membership. This was evident from the poor response to the call from the association leadership to boycott the dinner offered in honour of the visiting Ethiopian emperor or 'to refrain from giving him warm receptions at various airports and hotels'. The lamentation went on:

What was even more disturbing was that some students agreed to follow the decisions to boycott Haile Selassie's visit and failed to comply with it [at] the last moment. Members felt obliged to be in good standing with ESANA as well as remaining faithful to the demands of the Ethiopian court. Even more disheartening was their attitude on meeting the emperor. The form of their requests, and their apologetic stance would compete with the most ingratiating actions of the higher members of the Ethiopian bureaucracy . . . There is little need to specify the distance between the objectives of a revolutionary consciousness and the level of awareness expressed in these actions. (ESANA 15th Congress Proceedings: 8)²²

²² There is no better illustration of the dramatic radicalization of the student movement than the contrast between the sycophancy which is bemoaned here and the outburst that greeted the emperor when he visited the US again two years later: see Chapter 5: 162–3.

Within a year of the initiation of PEP, a significant shift became noticeable in its administration and orientation, with the formation of an inner core of the most committed and an outer core of the rank and file. Indeed, members of the inner core had come to be identified as 'cadres', with their own separate newsletter, which did not seem to have been sustained, however.²³ This inner core included members of the executive council and a select group from among the general membership. In the meantime, an assessment of the Program as implemented in the preceding year appears to have been made and 'it was found that one of its weaknesses was that it did not sufficiently integrate historical practice with revolutionary theory'. It was therefore suggested to focus the next PEP on the study of revolutions. Accordingly a bibliography of works on the Russian, Chinese, Cuban and Vietnamese revolutions were given, with a rather blanket endorsement of the works of General Giap and Frantz Fanon ('anything by Giap is recommended'; 'All books by Fanon are recommended'). In addition, cadres were enjoined to read *Monthly Review* and *New Left Review* regularly (Special ESUNA Newsletter, No. 1, 1970).

While I have not been able to come across an equivalent documentation on the European side, it is nonetheless a well-known fact that there were study groups in the various branches of ESUE. The ABCs of Marxism-Leninism as well as detailed discussions of such topical issues as the national question and the woman question were regularly discussed in such chapters. The general practice was for random selection of presenters to initiate discussions so that all members would come prepared. But, although some lively debates were conducted in these study groups, the overall tendency was to reaffirm positions that have already been taken rather than to critically re-examine them. Above all, as we shall see below in the discussion of the national question, the movement suffered from a fundamental weakness when it came to relating Marxist theory to the Ethiopian reality. In this respect, Tesfaye Demelash's critique that the Marxism of the movement was 'limited by formalism and abstract radicalism' has considerable validity. Although his article was primarily an assessment of ESUNA, with which he was most familiar, conclusions like the following had universal applicability:

ESUNA's preoccupation with the ideological reconstruction and validation of its own political identity and praxis through Marxism meant the reduction of Marxist theoretical discourse within the union to the articulation of simplified truths, radical phrases emptied of conceptual content, agitational slogan and action programs. On the whole, ESUNA Marxists were really hack theorists given to grossly partisan polemical appropriation and oversimplification of Marxist ideas and concepts . . . The stress on doctrinal purity and unity within ESUNA in fact entailed the application of methods of scriptural exegesis to Marxist texts, based on the belief that there is only one correct interpretation of the writings of Marx, Lenin, Mao, and their followers, and that that interpretation is spontaneously given by the texts themselves. (Tefsaye 1983: 34)

²³ At least I have not seen any issue that appeared subsequent to the first one, which came out in 1970 (no month indicated).

In short, the Ethiopian student movement produced many militant adherents of Marxism-Leninism but few theoreticians who were able to interpret the Ethiopian reality through the creative application of Marxist theory. Contrary to Messay, I would tend to see in this canonical character of student radicalism not a negation of the past but its continuation. What occurred was to all intents and purposes a transmutation of the religious orthodoxy of the classical tradition of which Messay is so enamoured into a Marxist orthodoxy, or continuation of dogma by other means. Agitprop, more than theory, was to be the hallmark of the Ethiopian student movement. The overriding preoccupation of the movement's leaders was to mobilize students for the anti-feudal and anti-imperialist struggle, and Marxist-Leninist writings provided a ready-made justification for such militant opposition.

An important component of that agitprop was revolutionary songs, which became a highly effective medium for rallying student protests both at home and abroad. It is difficult to reproduce the many songs that were composed in the second half of the 1960s and the early 1970s, songs that were to be such a distinctive feature of student meetings. Nor would mere reproduction of the lyrics adequately convey the spell that these songs actually exercised when they were sung, not to speak of the difficulty of translating them into English without losing much of their force. The tradition could be said to have begun with the chants of the students during the 'Land to the Tiller' Demonstration in 1965:

መሬት፣ መሬት፣ መሬት፣ ላራሹ
ተዋጉለት አትሸሹ፡፡

Land, Land to the Tiller;
Fight for him, undaunted!

Understandably, the Amharic rendering of the Marxist anthem 'Internationale', with a number of slightly varying versions, was a standard opener or finale of meetings. The killing of Tilahun gave rise to one of the most powerful songs evoking the memory of martyrs of the struggle as an inspiration to continue it:

ጥላሁን፣ ለምን ለምን ሞተ?
ማርታ፣ ለምን ለምን ሞተች?
ገርማሜ፣ ለምን ለምን ሞተ?
ታከለ፣ ለምን ለምን ሞተ? . . .
በኃይል በትግል ነው፣ ነፃነት የሚገኘው፡፡

Why, why, did Tilahun die?
Why, why, did Marta die?
Why, why, did Germame die?
Why, why, did Takkala die? . . .
[the song will go on with names of other martyrs]
Freedom can only be attained through violence and struggle!

Other popular songs were: 'The Oppressed Class' (*Tachaqwagn Madab*),
138 'I shall not bow down!' (*Alegazam!*), 'The Bitter Struggle' (*Mararaw Tegel*),

and 'The Time Has Come' (*Gizew Darasa*). There were also adaptations of Latin-American revolutionary songs, such as 'Venceremos!' sung by the bard of the Allende revolution in Chile, Victor Jara, who was tortured to death following the Augusto Pinochet coup in 1973.

COUNTDOWN TO 1969

The 'Land to the Tiller' demonstration was significant not only in its own right but also for ushering in a period of annual confrontation with the powers that be on a variety of social and political issues. Thereafter, it became almost a ritual, invariably in the second semester of the academic year, to challenge the authorities either on campus or off campus. These issues often emanated from the inadequacies of a system that was not prepared to make any meaningful political and economic reform. The radicals were adept at exposing these inadequacies. The rank and file followed, partly because they believed in the legitimacy of the cause, partly driven into opposition by the inept handling of the authorities. These annual confrontations reached a crescendo in 1969, when the confrontation between students and government was marked by a series of dizzying events: an unprecedented verbal attack on the emperor, the sentencing of students to years of imprisonment (even if they were subsequently amnestied), the hijacking of an airplane, the 'nationalization' of university property, the broaching of the dreaded 'national question', and the assassination of a student leader. We shall now examine these annual trials of strength in turn.

'Is poverty a crime?'

May 1966 witnessed a demonstration at which the first major clash between demonstrating students and police occurred. It all began with the peppering of the entrance of the New Classroom Building (as the new building housing the Faculties of Arts, Education and Business Administration was then known) with harrowing photos of poor people crowded in a shelter on the eastern outskirts of Addis. With the student penchant for hyperbolic epithets, the shelter has come down in history as the Shola Concentration Camp, Shola being the locality where it was situated. The camp was reportedly discovered by an American student couple, who alerted the student leaders, mainly those of NUEUS and MCSU, to its existence. The couple was awarded prizes at the next College Day for their troubles. The student leaders then managed to capture the conditions in the camp on camera and post the photos on campus (OI Tesfatsion).

On Thursday 26 May, fired up by indignation at the treatment that the poor had been subjected to, students began a protest march from the main campus, stopping over first at the office of the prime minister only a couple of hundred metres down the road and then at the houses of parliament. As they started their march from the prime minister's office to parliament, they were confronted by the police. Apparently, they did not want the students



4. A student delegation explaining the purpose of the demonstration at the Prime Minister's office. Abdul Mejid (with the tie) is addressing the Prime Minister and other officials, with Berhane Meskel immediately on his left
(Courtesy of Tadelech Haile Michael)

5. Prime Minister Aklilu with other ministers and some of the students
(Courtesy of Tadelech Haile Michael)



to proceed any further. It was at this point that the students were directed to perform the novel act of a sit-down strike – something that left both students and police confused. Finally allowed to proceed, the students then marched to parliament. It is interesting how an institution that was far from being an embodiment of genuine popular representation nonetheless assumed such symbolic significance in more than one student demonstration, serving as the body of last recourse. It was at parliament that one of the students²⁴ is reported to have challenged the president of the Senate, General Abiy Abbebe, with the rhetorical question: ‘Is Poverty a Crime?’ The President’s response – ‘We are all poor!’ – did not go very well with the students (Bahru 2010: 90). Less provocatively, he added that as, the legislative branch of the government, parliament had little power in matters like these (OI Tesfatsion).

On their return from parliament, students made the fateful decision of continuing their march to the city centre, Piazza, rather than return to Seddest Kilo. That was the moment when they made the shift from petitioning to public agitation. And that was what led to what has come down in student folklore as the ‘Battle of Ras Makonnen Bridge’. The police, who were determined to stop the students from marching on to the city centre, formed a barricade at the bridge. In the clash that followed, police were as much targets of student assault as students were of police; hence the inflated designation of the incident. Trying to use tear gas for the first time, the police suffered more from it than the students as the former, still novices at the handling of the now-famous anti-riot weapon, could not give the canisters the desired projection. Seven students were detained, but they were released the same evening. Even greater success was registered with regard to the resolution of the problem that had triggered the demonstration in the first place. The day after the demonstration, the chairman of the Student Affairs Committee, had congratulated the students on the worthiness of the cause they had espoused. Even more significantly, the prime minister informed the student *ad hoc* committee set up for the purpose that the government had acted swiftly on their demands by releasing the fit ones from the camp and shifting the remainder to Kolfe or to a hospital (N&V, 2nd series, I: 10). Some of the people whose cause the students had championed came to campus to express their gratitude. As the guards would not let them in, student leaders came out to meet them (OI Tesfatsion).

Thereafter, the wrath of the students was directed at the editor of the English government daily, *Ethiopian Herald*, who had written a provocative editorial entitled ‘Demonstration of Ignorance’, claiming that it had been instigated by students who were having difficulties with their studies. It was greeted with a chorus of denunciations in the above issue of *News and Views*. The responses included: ‘Editorial of Ignorance’ (Eshetu Chole); ‘Demonstration for Human Dignity’ (Abdul Mejid Hussein); ‘Truth, Please the Truth’ (Asgede Hagos); and ‘The Apologetic Opportunist’ (Minas Wado). Another jab in the popular satirical common read: ‘That will be the

²⁴ Temesgen Haile, later first English Editor of *Struggle*, according to Hailu Ayele; Abdulqadir Ahmed, according to Tesfatsion Medhanie.

day when some “editors” are taken to Shola for rehabilitation’ (*ibid.*). The Addis Ababa students got support from ESUNA, which reported the event in its August 1966 issue in a somewhat exaggerated manner, alleging that the general public joined in the demonstration and that the demonstrators were attacked by ‘mounted and motorized police’. More usefully, it reproduced a public statement on the ‘concentration camp’ issued by the press & information officer of NUEUS, giving background information on the setting up of the camp by the Addis Ababa Municipality and including vignettes of eight of the internees in the camp (*Challenge*, VI: 1).

In defence of civil liberties

During the week of 10–17 April, 1967, the university experienced its most intense period of convulsion to date in the wake of an abortive demonstration against the government proclamation restricting the right to demonstrate. Although the main campus at Seddest Kilo was also involved, it was the Arat Kilo campus that was the focus of the agitation and the confrontation. Historians trying to reconstruct the events of that momentous week are in the fortunate position of having at least two major documentary sources: the almost day-by-day coverage of events provided by the *University Reporter*, a fairly professional newsletter initiated by the university in 1967, and the report of the fact-finding committee set up by the Student Affairs Committee to investigate the matter, more popularly known as the Awad-Strauss Report.²⁵ The report, which is as painstaking in its compilation of data as it is considered in its judgement, starts with a day-by-day and sometimes hour-by-hour chronological narrative, then goes into a discussion of some specific topics and ends with conclusions and specific recommendations. The following account is based on the two sources, primarily on the latter.²⁶

What led the students to this third successive protest in the history of the movement was the promulgation of a law that students argued made public demonstrations virtually impossible by laying a number of preconditions, including the issuance of a permit by the Ministry of Interior.²⁷ There seems little doubt that the legislation had its origin in the government’s nervousness about the two previous public demonstrations that students had waged (in 1965 and 1966) and it was intended to discourage similar actions in the future. The students’ concern in deciding to stage a public protest against it on the day that they did appears to have emanated from a desire to beat the deadline for its coming into force rather than preventing it, as it had already been gazetted some two months earlier. The law was to

²⁵ So named after its co-authors: Awad Abdallah of the Dept of Sociology (Faculty of Arts) and Peter Strauss of the Faculty of Law.

²⁶ It is of some interest that *University Reporter* appeared under the motto of ‘Facts Before Opinions’. The Awad-Strauss Report commended the paper ‘for its high and impartial reporting standards’ (1968: 20). Conversely, NUEUS and USUAA had jointly dubbed the fact-finding committee an act of ‘espionage’ and *University Reporter* a ‘mouthpiece’ of the University, claiming that they would establish their own fact-finding committee. The report of that committee, if it ever was established, does not seem to have materialized (*UR*, I: 17, 18).

²⁷ See Balsvik (1985: 183) for the details of the proclamation.

come into force on 11 April, and the demonstration was called for Monday 10 April. An additional consideration, which emerged in the course of the meetings prior to the protest, was the need to go on record as having registered their protest against the restrictive law (Awad-Strauss 1968: 3). The decision to stage the demonstration was made at meetings of the constituent units of USUAA in the various campuses held on Friday 7 April. At the Seddest Kilo meeting, after a discussion of the issues raised by the proclamation, a majority of those present decided to stage a protest demonstration the following Monday, 10 April. This decision was ratified by a joint meeting of the USUAA Congress and the NUEUS executive committee held on Sunday, 9 April.

On the afternoon of 10 April, some 1500 to 1700 students assembled at the Arat Kilo campus with the aim of demonstrating against the proclamation. As they marched from the football field where they had assembled to the main gate, they found it closed and the campus surrounded by police. Then followed a period of frantic negotiations involving university officials, members of SAC, student leaders, and police officers, including General Yilma Shibeshi, the chief of police. After initially appearing to consent to the students staging the demonstration on submission of 'a list of student leaders who could be responsible for the peaceful conduct of the demonstration' (*ibid.*: 5; cf. Bahru 2010: 91), the authorities appeared to have changed their mind, presumably after the hawkish intervention of the minister of interior, *Dajjazmach* Kifle Ergetu. What followed was the inevitable outcome of a situation where two hostile forces were arrayed against one another. Following some taunts and jeers, stones were thrown from inside the campus and the police did what they had been smarting to do all along. They stormed the campus, applying a liberal dosage of tear gas and their clubs. They spared no one, attacking indiscriminately not only the students who had assembled to protest but also faculty and foreign students who were not part of it. By the end of the mayhem, some fifty students had suffered injuries that required hospitalization, some 450 students had been detained and the damage to property was finally estimated at Eth\$10,000 (*ibid.*: 6–7, 18; *UR*, I: 10). Part of the explanation for the excessive violence of the police was that the force deployed consisted of new and mostly rural recruits being trained in Dabra Berhan as distinct from the urban police who would probably have been less ferocious as they were very much part of the students' milieu.

The fact that the students were not only prevented from demonstrating on the streets for a cause that they thought to be of national importance but were also roundly beaten up in their own campus probably explains the resolve that they demonstrated in the course of the week-long crisis that followed. Reports that filtered through of the harsh conditions that the detained students were forced to endure could only have reinforced the resolve of the protesting students. The detainees were verbally abused and physically assaulted as they were transported to the various police stations and then forced to 'perform vigorous calisthenics [*sic*] on a gravel-surfaced courtyard' and to lie and roll on the gravel. The regime became slightly

less onerous at the police training centre at Kolfe, where all the detained students were eventually assembled, the chores changing to heavy exercises and purposeless carrying of stones from one corner of the compound to another. Interestingly enough, high school students also made their first significant appearance on the scene, expressing their solidarity with the protesting university students, who were holding rallies in their various campuses and chanting slogans opposing the anti-demonstration law and demanding the release of their fellow students. At a rally in Christmas Hall, one of the students was applauded when he shouted: 'we all want to go to jail', i.e. unless the detained students were released (Awad-Strauss 1968: 9–10, 19–20).

Even the generally lethargic Ethiopian University Teachers Association (EUTA) was moved to pass resolutions condemning police brutality and demanding the release of the detained students. In a letter dated April 11 and addressed to the emperor in his capacity as chancellor of the university, the faculty outlined the series of events that unfolded in the afternoon of the previous day, highlighting the peaceful nature of the planned student demonstration, the renegeing on the initial promise to allow the students to demonstrate, the raiding of the university campus by police accompanied by ransacking and wanton destruction of university and student property and even looting, and the mass detention and manhandling of students by 'uniformed and plain clothed policemen'. They protested 'most strongly at the savage and illegal invasion of University campus . . . and the unnecessarily brutal manner in which arrests were made' and demanded the immediate release of the detained students. They concluded their letter by stating that, until the detained students are released, they would find it impossible to conduct normal teaching (*IES* 02402.01.4A).

The ensuing confrontation revolved around the release of the detained students and the resumption of classes, the former a demand of the protesting students, the latter a priority of the authorities. Who the authorities exactly were also began to have a shifting meaning. According to the Awad-Strauss Report, as of the evening of Wednesday 12 April, 'administration of the University passed out of the hands of University officials and into those of the Government' (1968: 10). This usurpation of authority by the government reached a point where statements came to be attributed to the university president or other high officials who subsequently denied ever having made those statements. One such statement, reported on 14 April, blamed the whole incident on 'a handful of agitators who earlier "advocated the dismemberment of the Ethiopian nation" and who "are in the pay of certain enemy agents"' (*ibid.*: 20).²⁸ That Wednesday evening, the emperor and a number of ministers attended a board meeting, at which an ultimatum was set for the students' return to classes by 8 am the following morning (Thursday), failing which the University would be closed indefinitely. But this deadline kept shifting as

²⁸ How arguing for freedom of expression could be construed as 'dismemberment of the nation' is something that is difficult to comprehend. Such accusations were to be the common fare – more understandably so – after students raised the national question in 1969.

the students remained adamant in their precondition for the resumption of classes, i.e. the release of all detained students, and the government tried to save face. The final deadline was set at 4 pm on Friday 14 April for on-campus students and noon on Saturday 15 April for off-campus students.²⁹ The number of students who had actually registered by the Saturday deadline was 671 (*ibid.*: 11–13, 15).

The high point of the dramatic stand-off came in the morning of Thursday 13 April, when President Kasa, fortified with a message from the emperor, tried to persuade the students assembled on the football field at the Arat Kilo campus to go back to classes. His conduct in retrospect was a combination of guile and intimidation. As he approached the assembled students, a sizable police force entered the campus after him and lined the exit. Kasa was also accompanied by Awad Abdulla, a sociology lecturer and one of the compilers of the Awad-Strauss Report. Awad, who was reputedly a student activist while studying in Cairo, tried to use his credentials as a former student leader to urge moderation. Kasa then read the message from the emperor, managing to persuade some of the befuddled students to stand up while hearing the sovereign's august words. The tide seemed to be turning in his favour until a fiery tirade from Berhane Meskel Redda reinforced the students' resolve. Kasa's question to the students as to whether, having heard the wise words of the emperor, they would go back to classes, was met with a deafening chorus of 'No!' Kasa then declared that they were no longer university students. The students then nervously streamed out of campus between what looked like a gauntlet of policemen, who were no doubt ruing the missed opportunity to give the students another beating (*ibid.*: 12; Bahru 2010: 95–96).

By Friday afternoon, only four of the detained students remained in custody. It was reported that three of those remaining – Mesfin Kasu (president of NUEUS), Abbay Abraha (vice-president of NUEUS), and Temesgen Haile (editor of *Struggle*) – were to be charged for criminal offence.³⁰ In the meantime, Law students, who had been rather quiescent in the earlier stage of the confrontation, were filing habeas corpus on behalf of the detained students. The generally tense situation was made even more tense when rumours circulated on Friday that one of the students being treated at the Police Hospital had died of his injuries. This later proved to be false and the students suspected of spreading the rumour were detained at the 5th Police Station overnight (*UR*, I: 15; Awad-Strauss 1968: 15–16). The whole saga came to an end when all the detained students were finally released on bail of Eth\$100 each on Saturday morning, in compliance with the habeas corpus writ of the law students. The students who had boycotted classes held a meeting in the afternoon at the Menilek II School (as they could no longer use university premises) and resolved to go back to class. Permission to hold the meeting was reportedly given by the prime minister himself.

²⁹ *University Reporter* (I: 13) reports those deadlines while the Awad-Strauss Report wavers between 4 and 5 pm for the Friday deadline and noon and 1 pm for the Saturday one (1968: 12).

³⁰ The fourth student was Hailu Ayele, secretary-general of USUAA.

The government obliged by extending the deadline for registration until Monday 17 April (*ibid.*: 16–17; *UR*, I: 14).

Even if, as it turned out, they were not to be fully heeded, the conclusions and recommendations of the Awad-Strauss Report were remarkable for their boldness as well as their even-handedness. This section of the report opened with the statement that ‘Seen in world perspective, the events of April 10–17 are perhaps neither unusual nor alarming’. It described students as a ‘force for change’, which, ‘once channeled, is a mainspring of progress and forceful government; students who were docile or easily persuaded to accept what they dislike of society . . . would promise little for the future’. It urged the government to appreciate the university’s ‘need for independence’, cautioned students not to be oblivious to the unavoidable connections of the university with the government and enjoined the university administration to ‘accept the realities of the situation in the same manner as would a parent’, defending the students’ ‘right to be wrong and even defiant within the normal rules of social intercourse – their right to express their idealism and to seek change’. Demonstrations, it warned, ‘*will* happen, and it is part of the administration’s job to make the government understand this, and that more harm is likely to [result] from suppression than from a tolerant and understanding attitude’ (*ibid.*: 22–24; original emphasis).

The committee’s specific recommendations included the creation of an ‘official spokesman’ authorized to make statements on behalf of the university in such times of crisis – no doubt a precaution against the kind of misrepresentation of the university in which the government media freely indulged during the crisis. Second, it called for the formulation of a policy of support by the university administration for student demonstrations staged in compliance with the proclamation that had just come into effect. This was meant to avoid the kind of last-minute negotiations to allow the students to proceed with the 10 April demonstration. Third, and arising more or less from the second recommendation, it urged a dialogue between the university administration and the police to come up with a policy for future demonstrations, which were inevitable. ‘We do not have to wait for students to tell us by words or actions that there will be more demonstrations in the future. The University Administration should act now to secure police . . . restraint and government acquiescence in responsibly led, peaceful demonstrations’. Finally, it called for the ‘promulgation of a firm policy against student use of force’, urging disciplinary measures ‘short of expulsion’ against students who ‘use violence against fellow students or others’ (*ibid.*: 25–27).

The committee report was finally approved by SAC in March 1968, almost a year after the event that triggered it. Copies of the report were put on reserve in various libraries for the benefit of students (*UR*, II: 19). According to the *University Reporter*, among the specific recommendations that SAC formally accepted were the closing of the campus gates ‘temporarily as soon as mass student violence becomes imminent’ and the setting up of a five-person committee (the president, the two vice-presidents, the dean of students and the SAC chairperson) to handle the emergency situation.

For the students, 10 April, the first day of the week-long confrontation, was to go down as an important date in their folklore. It featured prominently in the University Day that was celebrated the following May. Two activities highlighted the event: a performance around the habeas corpus writ the Law Faculty students had prepared in the final days of the confrontation and a sketch emphasizing that the protest was not aimed at overthrowing the government, as alleged by some, but to air legitimate grievances. Perhaps the high point of the University Day celebration that year was the winning poem by Hailu Gebre Yohannes entitled *Barakata Margam* ('A Bounty of Curses'), a vitriolic attack on the regime (UR, I: 19). ESUE at its next Congress decided to name April 10 'Ethiopian Students Movement Day' (UR, II: 1) while ESUNA dedicated an issue of *Challenge* to the 'Anti-Demonstration Proclamation', with an introduction by the editor (Melesse Ayalew) outlining the evolution of the student movement, elements of the proclamation and its assessment by NUEUS (*Challenge*, VII: 1).

The fashion show incident

The lofty recommendations of the fact-finding committee were given a rude shock on 30 March 1968, when yet another confrontation took place that brought relations between the students and the university to breaking point. Unlike the 1967 showdown, the government was not overtly visible this time round, contenting itself with giving support to the retaliatory measures that the university administration took. Balsvik explains the situation by arguing that the students, having realized the limits of their strength from the 1967 showdown, were opting to attack the establishment chain at its weakest link, i.e. the university administration (Balsvik 1985: 217). But the student action that triggered the crisis had such a narrow base of support that it would be difficult to invest it with such strategic importance. What was interesting was that the frivolousness of the student action was matched by the high-handedness of the university response. Within the university, too, President Kasa remained very much in the background as the crisis unfolded; it is possible that he might have been out of the country at the time. Instead, it was his American vice-president, 'Dean' James Paul,³¹ who dominated the stage, waging what was to all intents and purposes a personal anti-communist crusade.

At the centre of the whole incident was a fashion show that the American counsellor for female students, Linda Thistle, had organized. The role that the American lady was perceived to play in diverting the female students from the struggle, much more than passionate concern for cultural purity, appeared to have been the decisive factor in pushing a small group of students to disrupt the event. Thus, the incident had the hallmark of a clash between the Americanism represented by 'Dean' Paul and Linda Thistle and the growing anti-Americanism of the students. What lent added

³¹ He was the founding dean of the Law Faculty of HSIU. Although he had subsequently exceeded that post by being elevated to that of academic vice-president, the title 'Dean' became inextricably linked with him.

weight to the allegation of the American counsellor's diversionary role was the fact that she had organized a similar event, dubbed 'Fashion Tea', about a year earlier coinciding with the planned University Day. In the end, the latter event had to be postponed as the dean insisted that the date for her show had been set too long ago and tickets had already been sold to several hundred people (UR, I: 18).

It might have been partly that experience that moved Walelign Mekonnen to write a particularly vituperative piece on campus girls in *Struggle* in early March 1968. Alluding to the disruption of the University Day the previous year, he attributed it all to the sinister influence of the female students' counsellor, who had apparently been advised by the US State Department to spare no effort in winning over the female students as it has lost all hope with regard to the male ones: «የወንዶች አዝማሚያ ደስ ስላላለን ባይሆን ሴቶች እንዳይበላሹ እርምጃ ውሰጂ፣ በጀትም መድበንልሻል» Thus, so Walelign's accusation goes, girl students did not show up at the annual Freshman Party at the beginning of the academic year – a ritual of induction into campus social and political life. A speaker always had to look around the room before opening his speech with the customary 'Ladies and Gentlemen!' as it was most likely that there would not be any lady attending. He even extended his piece into a global attack on women's backwardness by citing the reluctance of Swiss women to exercise the voting rights given them. The editor of the paper virtually gave his endorsement of the article by challenging female students to respond (*Struggle*, II: 3).

On 27 March, there was another article in *Struggle* by Iyob Tadesse entitled 'Message to our Sisters' and trying to dissuade the girl students from participating in the scheduled fashion show. The author had thought that the show staged the preceding year was the last exercise 'of advertising western dress as effective means of invading and corrupting our national culture' (*Struggle*, II: 4). There was a sort of lull in this tense build-up when NUEUS and USUAA leaders were invited to a film show and social evening at the girls' hostel, where the guests were treated to a film entitled *Man in Ethiopia*, which had been featured at Expo 67 in Canada, accompanied by refreshments and amiable conversation and exchange of jokes (UR, II: 22). The lull proved just that, for all hell broke loose on the 30 March, unleashed by a small group of students and abetted by the vengeful reaction of the university authorities. Unlike the April 1967 student action, both USUAA and NUEUS gave no formal backing for the protest, but they fell short of the formal disowning of the threat to disrupt the show that the university administration had demanded. Nor did last-minute assurances by the organizers that the show would feature primarily African dress design rather than the hated miniskirt assuage feelings.

The university authorities saw what was coming and started taking their own pre-emptive measures. In a letter of 29 March to Major General Yilma Shibeshi, the commissioner of police, the vice-president for business and financial affairs, Ato Wubshet Dilnessahu, and the vice-president for academic affairs, James Paul, emphasized the legitimate right of the

planning for months and for which entrance tickets had been sold and alerted him to the plans of a certain group of students to disrupt the event. To avert such an eventuality, the authorities requested the designation of police officers to work with the dean of students from the morning of the day scheduled for the show and the preparation for possible deployment of a police force of sufficient strength to cope with any possible violence. While the officials were prepared to tolerate peaceful picketing by students away from the venue of the function, they requested prompt intervention by the police should the campus guards be unable to remove any picketers interfering with the peaceful conduct of the fashion show (IES 02401.01.4A).

On the afternoon of Saturday 30 March, as invited guests came dressed in their best to Ras Makonnen Hall, where the show was being staged, they were met by a jeering crowd of angry students. Had the students been content to send their message across by picketing the event, as the university suggested, the whole event would have passed without much incident. But, determined to disrupt the function altogether, the students pelted the guests with tomatoes and eggs.³² About thirty-eight students were arrested by the police, who had promptly invaded the campus on cue from 'Dean' Paul, and kept in detention at Kolfe. Among the detained were Hailu Mengesha, the USUAA president, and Tsegaye Gebre Medhin, *Struggle* editor, picked up not with the protesting students but reportedly as they were coming out of their office. The fact that Hailu had a pistol with him when he was arrested was later adduced by 'Dean' Paul as proof of dangerous intent (UR, II: 23). Another piece of incriminating evidence that the university produced against the USUAA president was an allegedly inflammatory letter found in his pocket when detained and written to him by the president of NUEUS, Mesfin Kasu. This was actually a letter calling on the USUAA leadership to do its share for the commemoration of the anniversary of the April 10 (1967) protest, or 'Miazia the Second Movement') (Annex to UR, II: 24).

Had the matter stopped there, the crisis could probably have been contained. Contrary to Fentahun's assertion (1990: 66), the overwhelming majority of students were far from enthusiastic about the protest. To use his own expression, they considered the issue too 'trivial' to merit their engagement. They were either studying or had gone off campus for the weekend to visit relatives or to relax. The general mood of those who, on coming back to campus in the evening, heard about the detention of some students following the Ras Makonnen Hall assault was one of total disinterest, quite in contrast to the length they were prepared to go the preceding year to ensure the release of the detained students. But, 'Dean' Paul had other ideas. For him, the event was the climax of an unbearable situation where 'a small number of well-organized students [could] disrupt

³² Unfortunately, the incident did not have the kind of detailed and fairly independent reportage that the 1967 crisis had. The university did not apparently commission any such investigation and the person assigned by *University Reporter* to report on the event was himself arrested by the police along with the protesting students (UR, II: 23).

the University and abuse academic freedom'. The solution, he concluded, was to close the university 'until things are sorted out'. 'Either the University functions as a University or not at all', he elaborated. In part, the decision to close the university appears to have been a move to pre-empt a boycott of classes that he feared the student leadership would probably call for (*ibid.*). As he emphasized at a meeting of deans and SAC on the morning of Monday 1 April, 'This decision (to close the University) has been taken by the university administration – and by it alone – with the consent and approval of the Government. All of you remember the consequences of last year when decisions were allowed to fall out of our hand' (*ibid.*). Thus, police were allowed to raid the campuses and literally force students out of their dormitories. This was followed by the banning of NUEUS, USUAA, and its paper *Struggle*.

The steps taken by the university administration were endorsed by the University Board at two successive meetings on 2 and 3 April, the second in the presence of the emperor. The minutes of the Board meetings underscore the political – much more than the administrative – rationale behind the university's decision. They alluded to the annual disruption of classes by 'a handful of misguided students' and the responsibility of USUAA for the particular incident that triggered the university's decision. At its second meeting, the Board went even further and asserted that, although ostensibly a university issue, the incident was indicative of the students' determination to involve themselves directly in national politics. It accordingly gave its full support to the university's action against the students who had sought to make the university their 'political den' (the Amharic expression is actually *yapolitika washa*) and to ensure the peaceful conduct of classes (Board Minutes, 24.7.60/2.4.68, 25.7.60/3.4.68). Thus, there is some validity in the statement jointly issued by the executive committees of USUAA and NUEUS that: 'The fashion show incident was . . . only a pretext to paralyze the ever-increasing momentum of the Ethiopian student movement' (*UR*, II: 23). The general feeling prevalent among most students, however, was captured in the words of one student who commented that 'closing the University was the most unreasonable action the University has ever taken'. Not only was the university closed but police even shut down the Varsity Restaurant at Amist Kilo, which had agreed to feed the distressed students who had to look elsewhere for their meals as their cafeteria had been closed (*UR*, II: 24).

As in 1967, faculty members expressed strong reservations about the manner in which the university authorities had handled the incident. On 4 April, five members of the Faculty of Arts wrote a letter to the university officials transmitting resolutions passed by a meeting of HSIU faculty spearheaded by the Arts Faculty. The resolutions included the appointment of a committee to help students with food and accommodation until the university is reopened. The assembled faculty also deemed the banning of USUAA and NUEUS as too extreme. The university administration and the Faculty Council, they further recommended, should meet with teaching staff to enable the early reopening of the university. The meeting also

resolved that 'all students as to whom there exists no *prima facie* evidence of involvement in Saturday's disturbance should be allowed to return to classes without having to reregister or go through any special readmission procedure'. From the voting record that the faculty members attached, it is evident that all the resolutions, with the exception of the one against the banning of USUAA and NUEUS (which had 46 for, 11 against and 10 abstentions), were passed almost unanimously (*IES* 02402.01.4A).

While all the annual demonstrations since 1965 focused on national issues, there was one demonstration in 1968 which was expressive of the pan-African dimension of the student movement. On 13 March, some 2,700 university students marched across the capital in protest at the execution of five Rhodesians by the minority Ian Smith regime. The decision to demonstrate was taken at a general assembly called a day earlier, at which only ten students had opposed the motion arguing that the union should secure a permit beforehand. Rather ominously, Tilahun Gizaw, the future student leader, had set the itinerary of the march in his inimitable fashion in the following manner: 'First we go to the OAU; then we march to the British Embassy; after that, nature will take its own course!' Sure enough, the march to the OAU was a peaceful affair, with the secretary-general, Diallo Telli, addressing the students and stressing the need for all Africans, 'including the youth', to work together to liberate Africa. Things turned sour at the British Embassy, when some students started throwing stones as the ambassador came to address them. The peaceful march was then transformed into a pitched battle between students and riot police equipped with the latest gadgetry in riot control, vehicles mounted with water hoses (*UR*, II: 20).

SUMMING UP

What the above survey of the radicalization of Ethiopian students has hopefully shown is both the cumulative nature of the process and the manifold influences that brought it about. It cannot be subsumed under one convenient rubric of 'cultural dislocation' or the undue influence of a small minority, as Messay attempts to do. Least of all can one speak of the entire process as 'a manufactured movement' (Messay 2008: 21). The role of the Crocodiles and their followers in agitating the student population to come out in protest is an indisputable fact. But, that was one of a number of factors that contributed to the adoption of ever more radical positions. These other factors were both internal and external. They included, as discussed in detail above, the 1960 coup – even if it was abortive, and maybe because of that – the African scholarship students, global influences, and the high-handed reactions of the government and the university administration to student initiatives. With regard to the exacerbation of the situation by the government and/or university authorities, which is something that Messay does not deny (cf. *ibid.*), it could be said to have begun with the abolition of the boarding system as a purely punitive measure in 1962, ultimately just

because one of the students dared to recite a poem about the poor man's lot in Ethiopia. Then followed the retributive measures taken against students subsequent to the 'Land to the Tiller' demonstration in 1965, including the suspension of the nine students, the brutal suppression of the protests against the anti-demonstration bill in 1967 and the closure of the university following the fashion show protests in 1968.

Nor can one speak of a 'manufactured movement' unless one disputes the validity of the issues raised by the students. Only the 'fashion show incident' may be dismissed as frivolous. Otherwise, the 'Land to the Tiller' demonstration raised a question of fundamental economic, political and social significance for the country. The 1966 demonstration could be described as a stand for human dignity, even if the shelter that triggered the protests was described in hyperbolic terms. The April 1967 protests were staged in defence of a fundamental civic right, freedom of expression. So, it is not only the articulation of these grievances or the 'indoctrination' of the majority of the students by the radical group but also the social significance of the issues raised that mobilized the students.

5

1969: Prelude to Revolution

Revolutionary compatriots, for every demand that the fascist dictatorship unwillingly meets, we shall create even more demands from the inexhaustible pool of grievances of the Ethiopian people.¹

In the history of the Ethiopian student movement, there are years that stand out as defining moments. 1962, when the royal patronage that had characterized student-palace relations unravelled following the controversy over the College Day poetry recital, was one. 1965, when students came out onto the streets with the revolutionary slogan of 'Land to the Tiller', was another. But, few years rival in the dizzying cascade of events and their momentous significance as 1969. With understandable exaggeration, the chronicler of the movement, Randi Balsvik, entitles the section that describes those events as 'The Revolution that Failed'. I have chosen the relatively more modest title of 'Prelude to Revolution', i.e. to that of 1974. It could also be characterized with some justification as Ethiopia's 1968, for it had all the hallmarks of the global student revolution, while marking at the same time the climax of years of student agitation in Ethiopia.

'EDUCATION FOR ALL!'

Student protests in Ethiopia tended to have catch phrases that encapsulated the thrust of their demands. In 1965, it was 'Land to the Tiller'. In 1966, students queried: 'Is Poverty a Crime?' The 1967 protest in defence of civil liberties has sometimes been described with a penchant for contradiction as the 'Anti-Demo Demonstration'. The motto in 1969 was 'Education for All!' Moreover, the agitation started not in the university but in high schools, thereby underscoring the increasing importance of high school students in the movement. A special issue of

¹ From a student pamphlet distributed in the fall of 1969 (quoted in Balsvik 1985: 264).

the Ethiopian Students Union in Europe (ESUE) newsletter, *Teglachen* (*Yakatit-Magabit* 1961/February–March 1969), actually traces the agitation to student protests in the town of Dabra Berhan in northern Shawa in early February, when students came out in protest against fee requirements and the arbitrary dismissal of students as well as the general condition of schools in the town. The ensuing clash with the police gave the movement its first martyr, Shiferaw Kebede. As the *Teglachen* report put it in the starkest possible terms:

አቋማችንን ሽፈራው ከበደ የተባለው የደብረ ብርሃን ተማሪ ወስኖልናል፡፡ ከእንግዲህ ወዲህ የኢትዮጵያን ህዝብ መብት ለማስከበር፣ እኩልነትን ለመጠየቅ፣ እውነትን ለመመስረት ከቤ እንዳደረገው ሁሉ የሰማዕትነትን ጉዳና መከተል ነው፡፡ በፋሽስት መገደል፣ መዋረድ መንገላታት ለኢትዮጵያውያን አዲስ ነገር አይደለም፡፡ ያሁኑ የሚለየው መልኩ መልካችን የሆነ ፋሽስት ስለሆነ ነው፡፡

Our stand has been defined for us by the Dabra Berhan student, Shiferaw Kebede. From now on, what behooves us to guarantee the right of the Ethiopian people, to demand equality, and to ascertain truth is to emulate Kebbe's² example of martyrdom. Ethiopians are accustomed to being killed, humiliated and hustled by Fascists. What makes this one different is that the Fascist oppressor is our kin.

Within a week, this local grievance had been transformed into a general demand for educational reform. The list of demands now included not only the lifting of school fees, particularly the school leaving certificate examination fees, but also the dismissal of the minister of education, Akalewerq Habte Weld, the equitable allocation of scholarship awards, the augmentation of the government education budget and the expulsion of Indian teachers and American Peace Corps volunteers. Gradually, the demands snowballed into a call for a fundamental overhaul of the educational system including the alien nature and hence social irrelevance of the school syllabus, and the high attrition rate. These demands effectively became the signal for a nation-wide boycott of classes by high school as well as university students. The situation was exacerbated by heated propaganda warfare, the government using its electronic and print media and the students resorting to a new medium that was going to be common in the coming years: pamphlets (Balsvik 1985: 237–40). Indeed this pamphleting tradition could also be regarded as marking the transition for most of the radicals from student activism to professional revolutionary commitment. Some of the slogans posted around the Yakatit 12 Square, just outside the Seddest Kilo campus, read:

'Americans out of our country!'
'Freedom can only be secured by shedding blood!'
'Ethiopia's wealth should reach all!'
'Enough with life in slavery!'

154 ² An endearing form of Kebede. It is curious that the newsletter chose the student's second (i.e. father's) name rather than the first, as is normally the case.

'From the blood that was shed to end the Fascist occupation has sprouted the oppressive Ethiopian state. Freedom has given way to oppression.' (IESWM 6)

Other leaflets countered the claims in parliament of the minister of education about the state of education in the country, particularly those dealing with vocational schools and the budgetary allocation (IES CL 2395/04/4). Yet another leaflet detailed the sorry state of education in the country in comparison with other African countries and the more than 90 per cent failure rate of those sitting for the school-leaving examination. Even apartheid South Africa and Ian Smith's Rhodesia provide better educational facilities to blacks, one pamphlet argued, with five thousand university students in the latter, compared to less than four thousand for Ethiopia (IES CL, 2395/04/6).

But undoubtedly the most momentous exchange took place, albeit inadvertently, between the emperor and Walegn Mekonnen, who burst onto the national stage with a daredevilry that was not to desert him till the end. On the evening of 3 March, the emperor addressed the nation on the crisis that was unfolding. After outlining, as was very much his wont, his tireless efforts to expand education in the country, he admonished the students for their hasty and irresponsible action in the following terms:

የዩኒቨርሲቲ ተማሪዎች የነገ ባለአደራ በመሆናቸው፤ ስለአገራቸው እድገት በሚደረገው ድካም ተካፋይ ለመሆን ከልብ ሊያስቡና በሶሺያል፣ በኤኮኖሚና በፖለቲካም የሚገጥሙንን ልዩ ልዩ ፕሮብሌሞች ለማጥናት መጣጣር የተገባቸው ነው፡፡ ይሁን እንጂ፤ አሁን በትምህርት ገበታ ላይ ሳሉ የሥራ ልምድ አግኝተው ከተምረ ወደ ፕራቴክ ለመግባት በማይችሉበት ዕድሜ፤ ከአጉል ትችትና አስተሳሰብ መታገስ ይኖርባቸዋል፡፡ እጅግ የተወሳሰቡትን ሶሺያልና ኤኮኖሚክ፤ ፖለቲካም ነክ የሆኑት ጉዳዮች ትምህርትን ሳይፈጽሙ ባልበሰለ አእምሮ፤ ባልተመዘዘ ርምጃ ለማፍታታት መከራ ማድረግ፤ በተለይም እንደ ኢትዮጵያ ላሉ በራሳቸው ባሕል ሲመሩ ኑረው ወደዘመናዊ ለሚራመዱ ሕዝቦች አደገኛ መሆኑን መገንዘብ ያስፈልጋል፡፡ (AZ 29.6.61/8.3.69; emphasis added)

As custodians of the country's future, it is only fitting that university students consider seriously to make their contribution for their country's development and to strive to examine the diverse social, economic and political problems it is facing. But, they should refrain from unwarranted criticism at a time when they should be concentrating on their studies and when they have yet to translate theory into practice through work experience. One should realize that it is dangerous to try to solve complex and intractable social, economic and political problems *with a premature mind and ill-considered steps*, before finishing one's schooling, particularly in a country like Ethiopia just passing from tradition to modernity. [Emphasis added]

The emperor singled out for special reprimand the university students, who should have served as a model to their juniors rather than engage in premature and unbalanced acts. He attributed this irresponsible attitude to the instigation of 'a few miscreants under foreign influence'.

This imperial injunction not only fell on deaf ears but provoked one of the most abusive ripostes that any reigning Ethiopian ruler had ever been subjected to. Entitled ‘An Edict in Response to the Edict’ (*La’awaju Awaj*) and reportedly written by Walelign Mekonnen, this pamphlet was a direct – almost word for word – response to the emperor’s speech. The tract challenged the emperor’s claim about the expansion of education by pointing out the very high rate of illiteracy prevailing in the country. He chided him for his oft-repeated allusion to his donating his ancestral palace to the university by attributing the largesse rather to the nightmares that he had begun to have in the palace after the massacre of the hostages of the 1960 coup, even insinuating that he may have taken his compensation for it. He ridiculed the emperor’s claim of the progress registered by arguing that, even by African standards, Ethiopia remained one of the most backward countries. He took particular issue with the emperor’s castigation of the students for acting precipitately by countering that Ethiopia’s problems had become more – not less – complicated in the past five years and the students’ patience had been exhausted. The only foreign hand that was evident, he asserted, was the American hand that was guiding the regime. He ended the tract with a defiant rejection of the governments’ deadline for resumption of classes:

ከሰኞ መጋቢት አንድ ቀን 1961 ዓ.ም. ጀምረን ትምህርት እንድንቀጥል ታዘናል፡፡ አሻፈረን፡፡ ሲፈልጉ የሚያስወጡን፤ ሲፈልጉ የሚያስገቡን የበረት ከብቶች መሰልናቸው? በኢትዮጵያ ሕዝብ ሀብት የምንማር፤ መብትና ግዴታ ያለን ንፁህ ኢትዮጵያውያን ነን፡፡ ለማሰብ እንችላለን፤ የአእምሮአችን ስለት በዝገት አልተበላሸምና፡፡ (*Teglachen, Miyazya 1961/April 1969*)³

We have been ordered to resume classes on *Magabit* 1, 1961 (10 March 1969). No way! Do they think we are cattle that they can herd out and in at will? We are impeccable Ethiopians whose education is paid for by the Ethiopian people and who have rights and duties. We can think for ourselves; our mind is sharp, not rusty.

That clearly was more than the regime could absorb. There followed a crackdown on the author as well as others – both students and non-students –suspected of fomenting the nation-wide dissent. As if to substantiate its allegation of foreign involvement, the government ordered two Russian correspondents and three Czech embassy officials to leave the country within twenty-four hours for engaging in acts injurious to the national interest. The director of the Soviet Permanent Exhibition (or the Russian Library, as it was more commonly known) was also barred from entering the country (AZ, 5.7.61/14.3.69). But

³ Comparison of the typed *Teglachen* version with what appears to be the original handwritten and cyclostyled version available at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies of Addis Ababa University (IES CL 2395/05/45) shows some discrepancies. Apart from the title (the original describing the emperor’s edict in the definite, i.e. **ለአዋጁ** whereas *Teglachen* has it in the indefinite, i.e. **ለአዋጅ**), the *Teglachen* version seems to have some additions and deletions, including three significant deletions of references to the emperor’s old age, particularly a rather virulent reference to his senility (**በጃጂ አእምሮ**).

the students continued their boycotts, despite various government ultimatums. The emperor remained at the centre of things, receiving delegations of elders and parents (both from the capital and nearby districts) as well as representatives of high school students and university professional associations, the former probably contrived by the government itself, the latter largely of their own volition. In the audience with elders and parents, the emperor expressed his disappointment at the students' resort to violent conduct when they could have presented their grievances directly to him (AZ, 9.7.61/18.3.69).⁴

Allegations of foreign instigation ('there is a foreign hand in it') became the government's preferred explanation of student protests. But, there was nothing that students found as irksome as the allegation that they were manipulated by foreign hands. So much so that one of the leaflets that circulated at the time was a lengthy account of a mock court set up to hear the case, with the emperor as the 'defendant turned plaintiff', half a million Ethiopian university, high school and elementary students as 'plaintiff turned defendant', with 'Afa Negus' Radio (Ethiopia) and Deputy 'Afa Negus' (Ethiopian) Television as judges, 'Ferda Gamdel' ('Arbitrary') Abbeje Debalq as prosecutor and a host of stalwarts of the regime (including Mesfin Sileshi, Werqu Enqwa Sellassie and Sahlū Defaye) as witnesses. The 'plaintiff' accused the students of inciting the submissive and acquiescent populace and submitted that, since such a conduct was alien to the country, it qualified to be attributed to a foreign hand. The 'defendants' countered that it was rather the 'plaintiff' who brought along the foreign country (i.e. USA) along with the foreign hand. They then went on to enumerate the crimes of the prosecutor and the witnesses, sliding into a general indictment of the regime, including the allegation that the emperor was denied the Nobel Peace Prize because of hanging the dead body of Warqenah Gebbeyehu (as well as others involved in the plot) following the suppression of the 1960 coup (IES CL 2395/04/1).

If belatedly, the kind of direct talks with the students that the emperor was urging materialized towards the end of March, when the emperor successively gave audience to student councils of secondary schools and leaders of university professional associations. The former reiterated the catalogue of demands that had led to the boycott of classes: the replacement of incompetent and ill-mannered foreign teachers with teachers whose knowledge was commensurate with their pay, the improvement and expansion of education, the award of scholarship opportunities on merit, the abrogation of registration and examination fees, increase in university enrolment, basing 6th, 8th

⁴ This seems to have been a common refrain of the emperor. He appeared to have had an inveterate aversion to public expression of views. As early as 1918, when he was heir to the throne, he showed the same apprehensiveness towards the public rally against ministers, even if there seems some evidence that he might have been behind it, telling the representatives of the protesters who came to him that it was through such public protests that the Russian revolution had come about a year earlier (Bahru 2001: 132). See also Chapter 4: 121.

and 12th grade examinations⁵ on the standards of average rather than elite schools, postponement of the Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate Examination date for that year because of the disruption of classes, taking appropriate measures to reduce unemployment, and the release of the detained students. In his response, the only concession the emperor made to their demands was to inform them that he has already given instructions that those parents who could not pay the various fees be exempted. As for the detained students, he said, they will have their day in court (AZ, 17.7.61/26.3.69; IES CL 2395/04/2, High School Students Council to Emperor).

The leaders of university professional associations, who had come to the forefront in the absence (through dismissal or detention) of student union leaders, had their audience with the emperor at the Fairfield Palace in Debre Zeit. They were much less assertive in their address than the high school students. In a tone that was antithetical to Walelign's tract, they lauded the emperor for his efforts to expand education and expressed regret at the ill-considered formulation of student demands. After these diplomatic preliminaries, they asked for imperial pardon for the detained, suspended and dismissed students. The latter was a reference to the seven students dismissed and the forty-two suspended by decision of the Haile Sellasie I University (HSIU) Board. The dismissed were: Berhane Meskel Redda, Zer'u Kishen, Gebru Gebrewold, Yohannes Sebhata, Tesfu Kidane, Mesfin Habtu and Mesfin Kassu (Balsvik 1985: 258).⁶ In his response, the emperor reiterated his usual admonition that they could always have come to him rather than go to the streets and, as chancellor of HSIU, he was planning to talk to them in the university before they struck. He assured them that the status of the dismissed students had been ameliorated to suspension and the Board had been instructed to propose amelioration of the terms of the suspended students. Even with regard to the detained students, while he insisted that the law must run its course, he left the window for pardon open by saying: እንደምታውቁት ፍርድ በተራው ፍርድ ነው፡፡ ምሕረት ደግሞ በተራውም ምሕረት ነው፡፡ ይህም መንገድ እንዲይዝ አስፈላጊው ይደረጋል፡፡ ('As you know, sentencing is one thing, and pardoning another. Everything will be done to ensure this sequence is respected') (AZ, 21.7.61/30.3.69).⁷

These diplomatic parleys did not put a stop to the student agitation, however. While some students re-registered and started attending classes, others continued to disrupt the learning process. Police inter-

⁵ Marking, respectively, the termination of primary, junior secondary and secondary education.

⁶ It is of interest to note that the first four were core members of the Crocodiles group and were being dismissed for the second time, as they had been dismissed earlier following the 'Land to the Tiller' demonstration in 1965. Another source adds the names of Abbay Abreha and Tsegaye Gebre Medhin ('Debteraw') to the list (IESWM 7).

⁷ The parallels with the conduct of Meles Zenawi in the wake of the controversial 2005 elections and thereafter are striking, for he too insisted that opposition figures should have their day in court before he could consider pardoning them. It is not clear whether he was taking a leaf from imperial practice or whether one could attribute it to the weight of political tradition.

vention produced yet another martyr for the student cause. Police vans transporting rounded-up students to the police cadet training centre at Sandafa⁸ were attacked by students as it reached Kotebe, on the western outskirts of the capital. In the ensuing confusion, a student by the name of Demeke Zewde reportedly fell from the van and died on reaching hospital (AZ, 27.7.61/5.4.69). Student agitation had reached such a level by late April that the Ministry of Education had to close nine high schools (Tafari Makonnen, Prince Makonnen, Etegue Mannan, Asfa Wasan, Kokaba Tsebah, Madhane Alam, General Wingate and Shimelis Habte) because their students not only refused to attend classes but went around disrupting both elementary and high school classes elsewhere. At the same time, the ministry, in its statement on the closure of the schools, implicitly recognized the legitimacy of some of the student demands when it added that, in line with the emperor's instructions, the suspension of thirty of the forty students had been lifted and the Council of Ministers had set up a national education commission to investigate the current state of Ethiopian education (AZ, 16.8.61/24.4.69).

A police report compiled at the time gives a detailed account of the extent of the student protests, the number of students detained and the damage caused to life and property. According to the report, a total of ninety-two schools were affected throughout the country, with 76,513 students involved. Of these, forty-five schools and 49,995 students (nearly half and nearly two-thirds of the total number, respectively) were located in the capital. The highest number of student involvement was registered for Menilek II, Madhane Alam and Kokaba Tsebah schools (in that order) in Addis Ababa and Gondar Secondary School, Atse Galawdewos (Nazareth) and Wayzaro Sehin (Dessie) in the provinces. 2,775 students (2,205 of them from Addis) were temporarily detained and released with warning while 377 were charged in court. Sixty other persons were charged for supporting the students. There were two cases of death, 207 of wounded and twenty-one of being beaten, all conveniently attributed to students. The report also cited 180 cases of destruction of property, estimated at Eth\$21,359; the sum of Eth\$5420 was raised from court fines on students and their supporters (NAL 297/62/2708/2).

The year also seems to have witnessed widespread agitation in colleges outside the capital, even if rather belatedly, notably at the Agricultural College in Alemaya (Haramaya). The college was located in a rural setting somewhat midway between the two major towns of Dire Dawa (the railway town) and Harar (the provincial capital). With a view to making maximum impact, the students trekked individually to Harar in the early hours of the morning to avoid interception by the police and assembled there to stage their protests. Student agitation continued in the fall of 1969, including the distribution of a leaflet on *Dajjazmach* Takkele Welde Hawaryat, who had died fighting the police

⁸ Sandafa had come to replace Kolfe as the government's favoured detention centre.

at his residence in the capital in November 1969. The students got moral support and encouragement from radical faculty members who had recently joined the college, such as the poet Yohannes Admasu, and the Mayor of Harar, Dr Bereket Habte Sellassie, a former attorney-general who had fallen from grace and been banished to the provincial outpost (Bahru 2010: 69–71; NAL 297/1/2708/6).

In Addis, the protracted protests inevitably bred divisions among the student ranks between those who wished to resume classes and those who insisted the struggle had to continue until the student demands were met or at least those detained were released. A leaflet by the Committee of Leaders of Professional Associations bemoaned the re-registration of some two thousand students despite the resolution not to resume classes until the student demands were met (IESWM 10, 21.7.61/30.3.69). Most of the boycotting students were less accommodative, giving the students who had resumed classes the pejorative epithet of ‘saboteur’ (‘sabo’ for short, a term that was to stick to the bearers for quite a long time). These divisions apparently strengthened the hand of the government and pamphlets purporting to have originated from the maligned students and conveying their viewpoints began to circulate. One of these was entitled ‘The Voice of the Association of Ethiopian Students fighting for “Education for All”’ and described the boycotters as *wanbadewoch* (‘criminals’) who were misreading the students’ wishes. It heaped praise on the minister of education, the main target of student protests, and expressed loyalty to the country, the emperor and the government (IESWM 3). Some of these pamphlets might have originated from the students themselves, however. One, written by ‘Those who are yearning for peace and education’, lamented the annual disruption of studies and queried how long the majority of students should suffer through the wilful acts of a minority. It went on:

ልጅ ያባካው ለራት አይበቃም የሚባል የሀገራችን ተረት አለ፡፡ ... የኒከሮሲቲአችን ከተቋቋመ ከሰባት ዓመት አይበልጥም፡፡ ነገር ግን የኒከሮሲቲ ተማሪ በማያገባውም ገብቶ ሆነ በማይረባ ምክንያት ሰላማዊ ሰልፍና ብጥብጥ ያደረገበት ጊዜ ቢቆጠር ከኒከሮሲቲው ዕድሜ ይበልጣል፡፡ ... ምናል በመብታችን እየመረጥን ብንጠቀም? ሌላ አገር ብዙዎች ት/ቤቶች ቢያስቸገሩም ብዙውን ጊዜ ከራሳቸው መብት ጋር በተያያዘ ጉዳይ ነው፡፡ (IESWM 4)

We have a saying: ‘The dough that the child has prepared will not suffice for dinner’. Our university is no more than seven years old. Yet, the number of times that university students have disrupted classes through demonstrations for all sorts of reasons is more than that number. Why can’t we exercise our right judiciously? In other countries, students strike only in matters that affect their own interest.

On 29 April, the High Court sentenced four students and one teacher to terms of five years imprisonment: Walelign Mekonnen, Getachew Sharew, Fentahun Tiruneh, Ayalew Aklog and Gezahagn Mekonnen

(the teacher). As reported in the Amharic daily, *Addis Zaman*, and the police weekly, *Policena Ermejaw*, they were convicted of the crime of fomenting violence and disturbance in the country by reproducing and distributing pamphlets sent to them from abroad and taking advantage of the student protests to promote their objective in the name of the student organization, although none of the five individuals were actually office-bearers. It was not made clear whether these foreign elements, who were described as being 'inimical to the progress and unity of Ethiopia', were Ethiopians based abroad or foreign governments or bodies. A hand-written note allegedly sent to one of the accused and produced as evidence in court urged the recipient to dissemble the character of their 'association' by posing as 'civil libertarians' and 'Third World nationalists', since what the police interrogators wish to find out was whether 'our association is communist or not' (AZ, 22.8.61/30.4.69 and 23.8.61/1.5.69; *Policena Ermejaw*, 30.8.61/8.5.69, reproduced in Fentahun 1990: frontispiece).⁹

The five were subsequently joined in prison by other students and non-students sentenced to terms of imprisonment ranging from a few months to seven years. These included a number of the campus radicals, high school students who had smeared the emperor's statue in Piazza with red paint, the *Ma'ison* leader Worku Ferede, and two former Ethiopian Students Union in North America (ESUNA) activists, Henock Kifle and Tamrat Kebede, who got the maximum sentence of seven years. These last two had been inducted into the leftist organization, *Ma'ison*, and served as the link between it and the student activists in Addis, including the transfer of funds and duplicating equipment (Bahru 2010: 80, 97–98). The government allegation of foreign involvement in its indictment of the five students was apparently a reference to this link. It is also apparent from Andargachew's history of the organization that it was involved in the student protests of 1969 through its fledgling home-based branch. In a retrospective study of the organization written in July 1974, *Ma'ison*'s leader Haile Fida characterized the year 1969 as a defining moment in the organization's history, posing a serious existential challenge so early in its history (Andargachew 2000: 30–33). Also detained in various provincial prisons were Ethiopian University Service (EUS) students who were accused of fomenting dissent or showing disrespect to the emperor. These included Yohannes Sebhato, who was detained in Assala, the capital of Arusi province, and Gezahagn Endale, who was put in jail in Gondar (OI Gezahagn). Interestingly enough, both were to be members of the two groups that hijacked planes subsequently, Gezahagn to the Sudan in August 1969 and Yohannes to Libya in January 1971.

Militant student opposition in 1969 was not confined to the home front. Ethiopian students in the United States and Europe expressed solidarity with their counterparts in Ethiopia through dramatic

⁹ Fentahun's account of this episode (1990: 72) is disappointingly brief, dismissing the entire eventful period from their detention to their eventual release in a short two-sentence paragraph.

embassy occupations. The occupation of the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington DC in March was the first of such occupations in 1969. It passed off without much incident, when the students left the premises rather than face imprisonment (Bahru 2010: 83; *Washington Post*, 30.3.69). The second one was more serious and took place in July, on the occasion of the emperor's visit to the USA. This received widespread coverage in the US media, being reported in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, among others. The Ethiopian Students Association in North America (ESANA) also subsequently issued a report (it actually chose to call it 'A Documentary') entitled 'The Liberation of the Imperial Ethiopian Government Embassy in Washington, D.C.'. The Association also prepared for the occasion a pamphlet entitled 'Repression in Ethiopia', a revised and updated version of which was reprinted by the Africa Research Group in 1971 and became an important handout of the student movement in the years to follow. Outlining the autocratic nature of the regime, the backward social and economic conditions, the alliance of the feudal regime with American imperialism, and the leadership role of the Ethiopian student movement in the struggle against these conditions, the pamphlet underscored the need for 'all well-meaning and progressive peoples everywhere' to become aware of 'the diabolical nature of the government and the true conditions of the masses of Ethiopia' (ESUNA 1971: 5–11).

The demonstration and occupation began with a statement by the executive council of ESANA issued on 29 June, calling on its members 'to take advantage of this extra-ordinary opportunity' of the emperor's visit to the USA on 7–9 July to stage demonstrations in Washington DC and also possibly in Chicago, if the emperor were to visit that city. This move, it said, was taken at the insistence of many of its members and because 'the fighting students at home have specifically called upon us to use Haile Selassie's visit as an occasion to expose the crimes of his regime against the Ethiopian people' (*ibid.*: 12). The students adopted a twin strategy to voice their protest on the afternoon of 7 July. While thirty students stormed the embassy and ransacked it, smashing pictures of the emperor, over eighty of their colleagues demonstrated in front of the White House, chanting 'Down with the tyrant' and 'Haile Selassie must go' and carrying placards that read 'Feudalism no; People's democracy yes' and 'The Lion to the Zoo' (*ibid.*: 16; *Washington Post*, 8.7.69). Needless to say, it was those who occupied the embassy that got the greater police attention. According to an ESANA bulletin released on 11 July, fourteen students were arrested at the embassy and ten more at the demonstration in front of the White House. The latter were released after paying fines. Those arrested at the embassy were charged with unlawful entry, burglary and destroying property; two were charged with assault on a police officer, although one of them had actually to be treated for a minor head injury himself (*Washington Post*, 8.7.69). Four of those

arrested were released after two days on bail of \$1000 each, while the rest remained in jail for eight days before they were set free on bail of \$2000 each. A fifteenth student was deported for 'unlawful stay' after the expiry of his visa, even though his visa had only expired during his detention (WWUES 1969: 19–20).

The event was such a remarkable one in the history of ESANA that the organization compiled a dossier of reportage on the event, including general background information on Ethiopia and the emperor. These reports were, apart from the mainstream papers cited above, from some radical papers and news services that were openly sympathetic to the student cause: Marilyn Salzman Webb (Liberation News Service); *Uhuru* (a 'Black Community News Service' based in Montreal, Canada); *Muhammad Speaks*, which featured a fairly long interview with one of the ESANA leaders, Dessalegn Rahmato; *The Old Mole*, 'A Radical Bi-Weekly' published in Boston, and the *Guardian* of New York City. *The Black Panther* of San Francisco published a statement of ESANA issued on the eve of the protests, alleging that 'at least thirteen students are known to have been killed' in Ethiopia and vowing to struggle 'until feudal oppression is crushed' and urging 'all men of good-will and progressive organizations everywhere to support our just cause'. There were also solidarity messages from the Black Panther Party, Ethiopian Students Union in Europe, Union of Ethiopian Students in Germany, which also sent a telegram to Secretary of State William Rogers protesting the 'arbitrary arrest and ill-treatment' of Ethiopian students and issued a press release on the incident, and the Iranian Students Association in the United States, a chapter of the Confederation of Iranian Students (National Union). The last-mentioned, which drew a parallel between the 'corrupt, dictatorial and archaic' regimes of both countries, condemned the arrest of the fourteen Ethiopian students 'as an act of intimidation on the part of the US authorities' and demanded their immediate release (*ibid.*: 24–51).

Demonstrations and embassy occupations by Ethiopian students took place in 1969 in some European capitals as well, such as London, Moscow, Paris, and Stockholm (Andargachew 2000: 33). On 24 March, Ethiopian students in Sweden occupied the Ethiopian Embassy during the lunch break, smashing the emperor's portrait, toppling book cases and writing slogans on the walls. The ambassador, Abate Agede, was detained on returning from lunch. The students demanded the dismissal of the Ethiopian minister of education and the release of the detained students (IES CL, 2393/07/1/35). On 29 March, it was the turn of the Ethiopian embassy in Moscow, which was stormed by students, who disconnected telephones and ripped up portraits of the emperor. The leaders of the attack said that they were 'acting in concert with fellow-students all over the world'. The police were nowhere to be seen (IES CL 2393/07/1/32). On 1 April, the Ethiopian embassy in Paris was occupied by about fifteen students, coinciding with similar occupations in Belgrade and Washington DC (IES CL, 2393/07/1/30).



6. Occupation of the Ethiopian Embassy in Stockholm, March 1969
(Courtesy of Yeraswork Admassie)

According to Yeraswork Admassie, one of the student activists in Sweden at the time, a second occupation of the Ethiopian Embassy in Stockholm took place following the assassination of the University Students Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA) president Tilahun Gizaw on 28 December 1969. They had the cooperation of sympathetic Swedes who entered the embassy earlier to facilitate the entry of the protesters. Compared to the Washington embassy occupation, the Stockholm one was a relatively benign affair. There was no damage to property, the students being merely satisfied with replacing photographs of the emperor with their posters and perusing embassy archives to get an idea of the kind of reports transmitted. They even took an inventory of the food and drinks on the premises, refraining from consuming them even though those who had come from outside Stockholm were quite hungry by then. Although the police eventually put an end to the occupation, the protesters were released after paying a fine (Bahru 2010: 85–86).

In Ethiopia itself, the summer of 1969 witnessed an event that pushed student militancy to an unprecedented and spectacular level.

This was the hijacking on 11 August of an Ethiopian Airlines plane on a domestic flight. The seven hijackers were: Abdissa Ayana, Ammanuel Gebre Yesus, Benyam Adane, Berhane Meskel Redda, Eyasu Alemayehu, Gezahagn Endale and Haileyesus Woldesenbet. The multi-ethnic composition of the group was apparently deliberate, with two of the individuals being Amhara, one Eritrean, one Gurage, one Oromo and two Tigreans. The Oromo, Abdissa Aga, was the only non-student at the time and, according to Amanuel, actually joined the group at the last stage when his friend, Haileyesus, asked him to lend him his pistol. Amanuel reflected on the irony that the pistol that his friend Zakariah Abdullahi gave him had belonged to his late father, a former imperial minister, and might very well have been a gift from the emperor!

As the first hijack of a domestic passenger aircraft, the element of surprise must have assisted the hijackers a lot, although they did take the precaution of boarding the aircraft in the provincial towns of Bahr Dar and Gondar, rather than in the capital itself, where at least some of the well-known figures would have aroused suspicion. They did not seem to have met much resistance; it is not even certain if the airline had anti-hijackers on board, as was indeed to be the standard practice in later flights. But the speech explaining the group's motivation that Berhane Meskel was scheduled to deliver did not materialize. The hijackers' first destination was Khartoum, where they stayed for about six months. They subsequently got asylum in Algiers, where they continued to live under rather spartan conditions. More importantly, Algiers came to serve as the base from which they made a decisive, if not necessarily always salutary, intervention in the student movement abroad (OI Amanuel and Gezahagn; Kiflu 1993: 71).

Why the resort to this extreme and dramatic measure to express discontent? A commonly adduced explanation is the feeling of most militants that the student movement had reached the end of the road and that a new form of struggle had to be sought. The sentencing of the student activists to long terms of imprisonment might have accentuated the feeling of despair and despondency. Discussions among the many activists in prison and between those who were released after serving shorter terms and activists outside tended to reinforce this point (OI Gezahagn; Bahru 2010: 99). Yet, there were to be more hijackings even after the release of all the detainees in September, including one in December 1972 in which one of the released detainees, Walelign, took a leading part. Explanation, it seems to me, has to be sought in the cult of violence that had come to pervade the student movement. Hijacking had become a chosen instrument of militant opposition groups to convey their message in dramatic fashion.

Prior to the student hijacking in August, there have been two cases of attacks on Ethiopian Airlines aircraft by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). On 1 March 1969, commandos had destroyed a Boeing 707 Ethiopian Airlines airplane at Frankfurt airport, allegedly in protest at the use of the airline's aircraft in military operations in Eritrea.

On 18 June 1969, three armed members of ELF attacked another Boeing 707 Ethiopian Airlines aircraft at Karachi airport.¹⁰ So, the student hijacking appears to have been inspired in part by these prior actions. Where it differed was that it was not an attack on an aircraft on the ground but the hijack of a plane on flight.

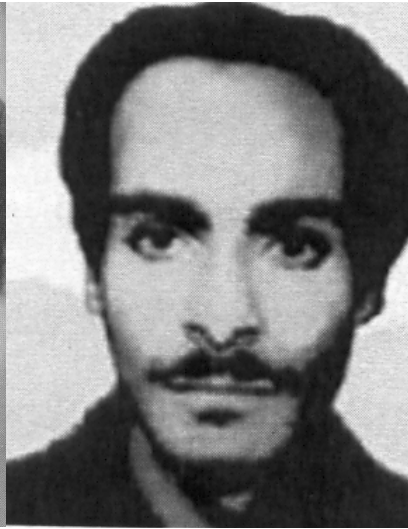
Just as it might have been inspired, at least in part, by ELF actions, the August hijacking also became a model that other militants sought to emulate in the future. On 22 January 1971, another group of students and former students hijacked another Ethiopian Airlines plane on a domestic flight from Bahr Dar to Gondar. The hijackers were Yohannes Sebhatu, Musie Tesfa Mikael, Ammanuel Yohannes and Debesai Gebre Selassie. They chose to go to Libya but eventually joined the fledgling Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) (*ibid.*). Amanuel was to be audacious enough to join under an alias the Walelign group that hijacked another plane in December 1972. Two of them (Yohannes and Musie) were liquidated in 1975 by the EPLF leadership, accused of being leaders of a leftist faction, or *Menka'e* ('bats'). Debesay was later executed suspected of *Menka'e* sympathies (OI Tesfatsion).

Sooner or later, these hijackings, successful at the beginning, were bound to end in disaster. This was what happened on 8 December 1972, when a group of seven persons led by the intrepid Walelign Mekonnen tried to hijack an Ethiopian Boeing 720 airplane with ninety-four passengers thirteen minutes after take-off from the Eritrean capital, Asmara. The hijackers were: Walelign, Marta Mebratu, Belay Taddesse (alias Mohammad Usman Mohammad, in actual fact the Amanuel Yohannes who had been involved in the 1971 hijacking with Yohannes Sebhatu and Musie Tesfa Mikael), Getachew Habte, Tadelech Kidane Mariam, Yohannes Fekadu, and Tesfaye Birega. Only two of the persons involved, Marta Mebratu and Yohannes Fekadu, were actually university students at the time. According to the police report that was released after the incident, 'Belay' was the one who rose clutching a bomb in his hand and declared that the plane had been hijacked. He threw the bomb when attacked by one of the anti-hijackers, damaging a part of the aircraft; Walelign managed to shoot one of the anti-hijackers on the jaw. In the end, all the hijackers save one (Tadelech) were killed; four passengers, one member of the crew and two of the anti-hijackers were wounded. The pilot, Captain Ketsela Haile, managed to land the plane safely in Addis Ababa. The captain and his crew were decorated by the emperor the following day; the anti-hijackers were additionally given promotions in military rank (AZ, 30.3.65/9.12.72; 1.4.65/10.12.72; 4.4.65/13.12.72; Kiflu 1993: 72).

¹⁰ See www.eritreacompass.com/history/91-eritrean-revolution/396-aeroplane-hijackings-by-eritreans-1969-1971.html



7. Marta Mebratu
(Tanash Ityopyawit, Yakatit 1965/February 1973)



8. Walegn Mekonnen

ROYAL PARDON AND STUDENT DEFIANCE

Had the court ruling delivered in April 1969 run its course, Walegn would not have been involved in the hijack as he would have been still serving his five-year sentence. As it turned out, the five and seven year sentences had come to an end in about four months when all the detainees were amnestied on the occasion of the Ethiopian New Year (which occurs on 11 September). As intimated during his audience with the leaders of professional associations in April, the emperor pardoned the sentenced students in a ceremony attended by the crown prince, the prime minister, ministers, university officials and teachers, and members of parent committees. The pardon was said to be in response to appeals of elementary, secondary and university students through the good offices of archbishops. Although the emperor claimed in the long speech that he delivered on the occasion that the sentenced students had also asked for pardon, this is not corroborated. In fact, one of them, Abdul Mohammed, recalls that the issue was raised among the detainees but was abandoned when Walegn threatened that if they 'intend to appear before that desiccated old man [i.e. the emperor, to offer an apology], I will jump and seize him by the throat. If bullets start to fly, it will be your problem' (Bahru 2010: 100). The emperor's speech once again underscored the need for patience, trying to explain Ethiopia's lack of progress by the single-minded devotion of their forefathers to defending the country against foreign invasion and the liquidation of the intelligentsia by the Fascists. Ethiopia, he stated,

should follow the example of Japan in combining tradition and modern technology, not slavishly imitate any one particular foreign ideology (AZ, 5.13.61/10.9.69).

According to Balsvik, it was the threat of boycott of the 1969/70 Ethiopian University Service programme by the incoming EUS students then undergoing the pre-assignment orientation programme that ultimately forced the government's hand. By this time, EUS teachers had come to constitute such an important component of the teaching staff that their boycott would have resulted in further disruptions of the school system. The EUS participants refused to go to their assigned posts unless a number of demands, including the release of the detained students, were met (Balsvik 1985: 261; cf. IESWM 14, n.d.; IESWM 1962–1969, Board Minutes, 13.1.62/23.9.69). The formal end of the boycott was communicated to the student body by a joint statement of USUAA, the National Union of Ethiopian University Students (NUEUS) and the *ad hoc* committee of EUS participants on 29 September. After underscoring the crucial role of staff members of the university in resolving the stalemate, the statement recommended the resumption of classes and the departure of all EUS students to their assigned posts in view of the granting of all the student demands (IESWM 1962–1969, 29.9.69). The minutes of the HSIU Board meeting of 1 October described in rather euphoric terms what it described as a constructive dialogue between the university administration and the students that made possible the resumption of classes and the departure of EUS students to their assigned posts:

ይህ በአስተዳደሩና በተማሪዎች መካከል የተደረገው መወያየትና መፈራረም የመጀመሪያ ጊዜ በመሆኑ አዲስ ነገር (አዲስ ፕሬሲዳንስ) መሆኑ መታወቅ እንዳለበትና እንደዚህ ያለውን መግባባት ቀጥሎ ተማሪዎች ትምህርታቸውን እንዲቀጥሉ ማድረግ መልካም መሆኑ ተገለጠ፡፡ በዚህ ባሁኑ መወያየት ምክንያት ሊገኝ የተቻለውን የርጋታ መንፈስ መከታተልና ፀንቶ እንዲቆይ የበለጠ መከራ ማድረግ ይጠቅማል፡፡ (IESWM 1962–1969, Board Minutes, 21.1.62/1.9.69)

It was agreed that this dialogue and agreement between the administration and the students sets a new precedent that should be followed up to ensure the normal conduct of classes. It would be useful to build on this to consolidate the peaceful atmosphere that this dialogue has generated.

Kiflu Tadesse, on the other hand, interpreted the outcome as 'total government surrender', marked as it was by the release of the detained students, the waiving of the school fees and the removal of the universally hated minister of education. 'It was an unqualified triumph and the high tide of the student movement', he concluded (Kiflu 1993: 51).

It was probably this feeling of success that emboldened the students to engage in ever more militant action. The first issue of *Struggle* published in the new academic year (1969/70) was indicative of this new combative mood. At the same time, serious divisions had started to emerge within the student ranks between those who registered for

classes during the disturbances and those who continued to boycott classes, the latter, as indicated above, dubbing the former 'saboteurs'. The minutes of the HSIU Board meeting held on 4 November 1969 underscored these two points. Arguing that *Struggle* had become an instrument of a few students, that its low standard and partisanship had become an embarrassment to the university and that the students had continued to publish it illegally outside after it was banned by the university, the Board concluded:

ጉዳዩ በጠቅላላው ከዩኒቨርሲቲው ውጭ በመሆኑ መንግሥት ባለው ፖሊሲና ባለው ድርጅት ፍየሎቹ ከበጉቹ እየተለዩ ያለማወላወልና ያለ ምኅረት እንዲቀጡ ማድረግ የርሱ ኃላፊነት በመሆኑ ጉዳዩን የቦርዱ ሊቀ መንበር ለመንግሥት ባለሥልጣኖች ያስታውቁ፡ ስለሚወስደውም ውሳኔ አስፈላጊው ቀደምት ጥናት በሰፊው መደረግ አለበት፡፡ (HSIU Board Minutes, 25.2.62/4.1..69)

The entire situation has gone out of the control of the university. The Board chairman has the responsibility of notifying government authorities that the government should have the policy and organizational setup to separate the sheep from the wolves and to punish the latter without mercy.

Student activity in the academic year 1969/70 began with the election of Tilahun Gizaw as USUAA president. A paternal brother of the emperor's daughter-in-law, Princess Sara Gizaw, Tilahun had severed his connections with his more privileged kin to align with the radical group on campus. He had sought election to the post in the preceding academic year but lost to Makonnen Bishaw, a moderate. Disappointed and apparently disenchanted with the ethnic innuendos in the build up to the election, he withdrew from the university for a year, devoting the period to extensive reading of Marxist literature and some soul-searching. His friends and admirers claimed that he came back a transformed man. But, the tempo of student radicalism, which had picked up momentum after the perceived successes of the preceding year, was to prove too fast even for him to be able to control. The stridency of student demands was encapsulated in one pamphlet that was circulated at the time: 'Revolutionary compatriots, for every demand that the fascist dictatorship unwillingly meets, we shall create even more demands from the inexhaustible pool of grievances of the Ethiopian people' (quoted in Balsvik 1985: 264).

The prevalent picture could be said to have been one of accommodation and compromise on the part of the government and the university authorities and relentless assault by the students. This is brought out very clearly in a report submitted by the university to the commission set up by order of the emperor to investigate the 28/29 December incident that we shall examine shortly. This is a fairly comprehensive and carefully compiled report, which begins with a short survey of the growth of the student movement from the early 1960s to the momentous clashes of 1969: from the poetry contests on College Day and the termination of the boarding system to the explicitly political demands

of the 1965, 1966 and 1967 demonstrations. According to the report, at the beginning of the 1969/70 academic year, the university had to strain its resources to the utmost to accommodate students who had withdrawn during the disturbances, those who had remained, those returning from EUS and freshmen, reversing its earlier decision to force the withdrawn students to wait until the following academic year to be readmitted. Moreover:

የታሠሩትን፣ በፍርድ ቤት የተቀጡትን፣ በቦርድ በኩል የተወገዱትን ተማሪዎች ነፃ ለማድረግና የተማሪዎቹ መንፈስ ተረጋግቶ አዲስ ዓመት በሰላም እንዲጀመር የተደረጉት ሙከራዎች፣ ስብሰባዎች፣ ምልጃዎች አያሌ ነበሩ፡፡ (University Report on Dec. 28/29 incident)

Many were the efforts expended, the meetings held and the pleas made to secure the release of the detained and sentenced students and to rehabilitate the students dismissed and suspended by the Board, so that the students can begin the new academic year in a peaceful and stable condition.

The first dramatic act of USUAA in 1969/70 was the ‘nationalization’ of the cafeteria on campus belonging to the University Alumni Association. Remonstrations by the Association that the proceeds from the café were actually used to provide remedial courses to students who had failed their Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate (ESLC) examinations were to no avail. USUAA declared the establishment an instrument of ‘local imperialism’ thriving on the profit it amassed from poor students. The property was taken over by a ‘special force’ of USUAA and, christened ‘People’s Bar’, began to give services at reduced prices, with students taking turns to cater. Probably because the Association took the whole matter light-heartedly and even wrote a letter to the university administration strongly urging it not to use the incident as a pretext for taking repressive measures, there was no retribution (Balsvik 1985: 266). It is not at all evident whether the ‘People’s Bar’ of the main campus at HSIU was inspired by the ‘People’s Park’ that Berkeley students had created a few months earlier by taking over a plot of land on campus.¹¹ But the conjuncture is striking. The only major difference is that ‘People’s Park’ was to remain a live issue for decades, while ‘People’s Bar’ was soon forgotten.

The real showdown started with the 17 November issue of *Struggle*. The editorial effectively called for armed struggle to topple the regime. But the pieces that sent shockwaves in government circles were Walegn’s article in English on the question of nationalities and Abraham Gebre Egziabher’s even more provocative rendering of the same question in Amharic.¹² The reaction from the government press was immediate and indicative of the end of the government’s patience. Successive issues of the government dailies, *Addis Zaman* and *The Ethiopian Herald*, waged a co-ordinated campaign against the students,

¹¹ See Chapter 1: 26 for the ‘People’s Park’ at Berkeley.

¹² See Chapter 6: 198ff. for a detailed discussion of these articles.

almost invariably through their editorials. Thus the 19 *Hedar* (28 November) issue of the Amharic daily emphasized the determination of some students to persist in their destructive activities despite the royal pardon. Their writings, it said, were permeated by communist thinking and both students and their parents should note that the government has an obligation to ensure peace and security. Similar sentiments were expressed in the Amharic weeklies, *Yazareytu Ityopya* and *Yaltyopya Demts* (Andargachew 2000: 40–41).

The university, too, was forced to take action. The Board, in two successive meetings it held on 28 November and 2 December, apart from discussing the illegal seizure of the Alumni Association café and the continuing tension between those students who had withdrawn and those who had continued classes, had noted the warning that had been given to the editorial board of *Struggle* so that they should desist from publishing the kind of writing they had been doing (IESWM 1962–1969, Board Minutes, 18.3.62/28.11.69, 23.3.62/2.12.69). In a letter written on 8 December, the university president, Aklilu Habte, informed the editor-in-chief of *Struggle*, Yohannes Kifle, that the paper had been suspended because its last two issues had convinced the Board that it ‘was not a free and considered expression of students’ viewpoints but rather a political propaganda leaflet advocating the overthrow of a legitimate government by use of force and other means’. On receipt of the official notification, the editorial board, after deploring the suspension of what it called ‘the great EYE-OPENER and the most esteemed [*sic*] revolutionary organ of the people’, emphasized the need for a ‘qualitative change’ in the form of struggle ‘to transcend and challenge the present legal framework’ (IESWM 1962–1969, Editorial Board to Student Body, 9.12.69).

Addis Zaman, on the other hand, hailed this decision because *Struggle*, which it deemed to be the product of a few students swayed by foreign ideology, was undermining the unity and long history of the country and proving an obstacle to the intellectual development of the students. It took particular exception to Abraham’s article, heaping abuse on ‘the degenerate pen and the murky ink’ with which it was written and asking rhetorically, if such a paper does not deserve to be suspended, what does? (AZ, 1.4.62/10.12.69) *The Ethiopian Herald* had a similar editorial entitled ‘Academic Freedom’, asserting that ‘the ringleaders of radical irresponsibilities’ at HSIU did not know its meaning as they were repressing the views of the majority. The banned paper, it argued, had become the mouthpiece of ‘a strident minority . . . manipulated by aliens [*sic*]’. It cited in particular the article condoning secession (EH, 13.12.69).

That the government was preparing for the inevitable fray is evident from a document of the police force entitled ‘Guidelines for checking the students’ illegal activities’. Like the university report cited above, it too begins with a survey of student protests since 1965, albeit presenting a rather jaundiced interpretation of student demands. Perhaps the

most instructive aspect of this introductory part of the document is the spread of student agitation to a number of high schools following the 'fashion show incident', something that is not often reflected in the literature, save for a brief reference in Balsvik (1985: 221–2). The police account listed the schools involved (Tafari Makonnen, Madhane Alem, Menilek II, Prince Makonnen and Technical School) and then went on to give an estimate of the damage to property (Eth\$92,797.30) and the number of killed (three 'civilians') and wounded (104). This is indeed the only reference that I know to fatal casualties arising from student protests before 1969. Both the foreign-based student unions and the home-based but 'foreign-supported' NUEUS and USUAA (or 'City-Wide', as the report calls it), through their journals, were deemed to be the culprits in sowing dissension between the students and the public (IEGPF: 1–4).

The more pertinent section of the document is that detailing the government's contingency plan in anticipation of student protests. In fact, these preparations go back to early 1969, when a planning meeting was held on 5 February under the chairmanship of the police commander, Major General Yilma Shibeshi. Attending the meeting were high-level representatives of the Army, the Imperial Bodyguard and the Territorial Army. The meeting discussed and approved the draft contingency plan, which had three major components: strategic and political, tactical and technical (operations), and security. This was then presented to the emperor and secured imperial approval. The document then goes on to give a chronological account of the evolution of the protests from February to June without actually giving any specific information as to how the elaborately drawn out contingency plan was implemented, except to conclude with some confidence that 'their agitation and number notwithstanding, the students' idea was nipped in the bud without causing too much damage to life and property' (*ibid.*: 5–11).

It was essentially this same plan that was distributed to security forces by order of the police chief, Yilma Shibeshi, in late 1969 in anticipation of yet another round of student protests. Unfortunately, there is no date to indicate when exactly this communication was made, although internal evidence clearly shows that it was probably before the December 28 incident. But the guideline gives details of the weapons to be used, the places to be protected, the 'psychological warfare' campaign to be waged, the logistical supplies to be deployed, the chain of command to be followed, and the detention centres and hospitals for the wounded to be provided. In conclusion, the directive emphasized the importance of taking pre-emptive steps and of keeping the right balance between patience and prompt action (*ibid.*: 14–20).

What is worth noting here is that, probably alarmed by the virulence of the government's media campaign, students were beginning to adopt a more cautionary stance. This was particularly the case with student leaders like Tilahun, who had woken up to the looming danger. Threats

that he was reportedly receiving might also have contributed to this new attitude. There were also rumours of the compilation of a list of students to be imprisoned or even eliminated. Meetings of both the USUAA Congress and General Assembly clearly reflected this mood of caution, even if there were some radicals who were smarting for a showdown (Balsvik 1985: 268). At the General Assembly meeting, Tilahun resorted to the famous Maoist dictum to drive his point home: 'When the enemy attacks, we retreat; when the enemy retreats, we attack!' Ironically, this more moderate position did not save either him or the other students from the crackdown that followed.

THE SHOWDOWN

It was years of student agitation and confrontation with the government – and not simply the dizzying cascade of events of that year – that attained their climax on the night of Sunday 28 December 1969. Around 8:45 pm, Tilahun Gizaw was seeing off his girlfriend, Yodit Taye, and another friend named Makonnen Sisay¹³ from the student residence near Afincho Bar when he was approached by two men and shot three times.¹⁴ Although the identity of the assailants was not known at the time, students had no doubt in their mind that they were government agents. The chief assassin was subsequently identified as Major Berhanu Mecha, a police officer who had been selected for the purpose by the high-level committee of military and police commanders that had been set up to prepare the contingency plan to counter student protests (OI Colonel Getachew Wakjira). The major subsequently became one of the sixty former government officials and dissidents executed by the Darg on 24 November 1974.

Tilahun was rushed to the nearby Haile Sellassie I Hospital and passed away while doctors were reportedly preparing to operate on him. By this time, some three hundred to four hundred students had flocked to the hospital from the different campuses. The body soon became a battleground between them and the police, who wanted to carry out formal investigations, including an autopsy at the Menilek II Hospital, the unit customarily designated for such purpose. Around 1:30 am, the students managed to transport the body away to the main campus on a land rover. Waking up the president, they persuaded him to let them

¹³ There is some confusion around the name of the third person: further down, on the basis of Yodit's testimony, the same report identifies him as Tekle.

¹⁴ This account of the night of 28 December and the following day is based on reports from the police and the university. Although divergent on some small matters of detail, they are in agreement on the broad essentials. The university account is contained in the Minutes of the Joint Meeting of the Executive Committee and the Deans Council (HSIU), 30.12.69 (hereafter Joint Minutes), and in the report on the two days submitted to the government, while the police account is found in the report referred to above (IEGPF) as well as the summary that appeared in *Addis Zaman*, 21.4.62/30.12.69.



9. Tilahun Gizaw
(From the author's personal collection)

deposit it in the morgue of the Medical Faculty, then at the main campus of the university, so that the autopsy could be conducted there under their watchful eye. Efforts by staff of the Medical Faculty to persuade the students to let the body be taken to the only institution authorized to conduct an autopsy (i.e. Menilek II Hospital) were all in vain. Finally, around 8 am, the government authorities were prevailed upon to concede to the student demand and the authorized doctor came to conduct the autopsy on campus (Joint Minutes – see fn 15).

Meanwhile, attention had begun to shift to the thousands of students, both from the university and from the high schools, who were streaming to the Seddest Kilo campus on the morning of Monday 29 December after they had heard of the incident. The police report estimated the number of students who had assembled between 9:30 and 12 noon at 15,000.¹⁵ The placards that students carried included the following: ጥላሁን ወንድማችን፤ በግፍ ተገደለ በአገራችን ('Tilahun our brother has been brutally murdered in our land!'); ጥቃትን በደልን እንደምስሰ ስላለ፤ ወጣቱ ጥላሁን በግፍ ተገደለ: ('Tilahun has been brutally murdered because he dared to fight oppression and injustice'); የጥላሁን መሞት ትግላችንን ያፋጥነዋል እንጂ ወደ ጓላ አይገታውም ('Tilahun's death will accelerate, not impede, our struggle!') In addition, a pamphlet blaming the government for the murder and giving an account of Tilahun's life, particularly focusing on his class denial and identification with the downtrodden, was distributed to the crowd (IEGPF: 25–27).

There soon developed a tug-of-war between the students and the

¹⁵ Another estimate puts the number at more than 30,000 (NAL 21/03/3), but this is probably a bit on the high side.

government authorities over the student leader's body. The former had taken it over after the autopsy and placed it at the entrance to the New Classroom Building in preparation for a procession to his father's house. The latter were insisting that they should hand over the body to the representatives of Tilahun's half-sister, Princess Sara Gizaw. A high-level government council consisting, among others, of the minister of interior, the minister of defence, the commander of the ground forces, the commander of the police force and the minister of state at the Ministry of Information finally decided to authorize a unit of the Imperial Bodyguard to enter the campus, seize the body and hand it over to the princess's representatives. The university authorities were not informed of, let alone consulted on, the matter. Around 2:45 pm, the Bodyguard unit filed into the campus, took a position behind the assembled students and then charged with bayonets fixed. There was shooting, originating from the students according to the police report, but the only dead and wounded were students. The final tally had three students dead: Sibhatu Wubneh (a second year Law student, who was apparently chanting slogans over a megaphone at the time) (NAL 21/03/3) Jemal Hassen (a second year Arts student) and Abebe Berhe (a freshman in the physical science stream). Sixteen students were wounded. Also wounded on both legs was a Polish political science professor, Professor Szuldrzynski, ironically very much a supporter of the regime.¹⁶ The military force managed to snatch away the body and hand it over to the police, who were waiting outside the gate, and the body was carried in an ambulance to the outskirts of the city for immediate transport to Tilahun's birthplace in Maichew (southern Tigray), where it was buried on Tuesday 30 December in the presence of some five hundred people, including his half-sister and the governor of the province, *Ras Mengesha Seyoum* (Joint Minutes; IEGPF: 27–28).

But the Bodyguard were not content with such a neat rescue operation. They prolonged their visit by going from one building to another, beating both students and staff with the butt of their guns, bayoneting and forcing them to put their hands up or to kneel down. Staff particularly resented the fact that they were manhandled although they were in their offices or the staff lounge and had shown their staff IDs. A number of students, particularly those identified as leaders and agitators, were rounded up and detained. The police report gave the figure of twenty-seven students in this category, including Gebru Mersha, Walelign Mekonnen, Tekalign Wolde Amanuel and Yirga Tesema, who was wounded and was being treated at Haile Sellassie I Hospital but was later transferred to the Police Hospital, presumably the better to watch on him (IEGPF: 28–29). The report further gives the following gleeful description of the punishment it meted out to the students:

¹⁶ The emperor sent him flowers in hospital.

የዩኒቨርሲቲ ተማሪዎች የሚሹ የጥላሁንን አስከሬን አንሰጥም ብለው ባወኩበትና የየትምህርት ቤቶችንም ተማሪዎች ሰብስበው ረብሻ ለማንሳት ባቀዱት ጊዜ በክብር ዘበኞችና በፖሊሶች ተከበው ባንድ በር ብቻ እንዲወጡ ተደርጎ ሁለተኛ ይህን የመሰለ ተግባር እንዳይፈጽሙ መቀጣጫ ይሆናቸው ዘንድ ሴቶችም ሆኑ ወንዶች ደህና አድርገው ተቀጥተዋል፡ (ibid.: 31)

As university students refused to hand over Tilahun's body and further sought to create disturbance by rallying high school students to their cause, they were surrounded by members of the Bodyguard and Police, forced to file out through only one gate and both male and female students were given a punishment they will never forget.

Although the university president had tried to control the situation, it was clear in more senses than one that the whole matter had gone beyond his control. The Bodyguard had entered the campus without his knowledge and in fact while he had gone across the street to consult with the high-level government task force set up to handle the situation. The Joint Minutes underscored this violation of the university's autonomy, as well as the mayhem that the Bodyguard unleashed on campus after they had secured their objective of snatching the body away. Moreover, when the university was closed because of the disturbances, the announcement was made not by the university but by the Ministry of Education. The joint meeting of the executive committee and the deans' council set up a committee to draft a resolution 'contesting the coming of the troops onto the campus without prior consultation with the authorities of the University and condemning the violent action taken by the troops' (Joint Minutes, 8). The resolution that was eventually adopted further called for 'a full investigation followed by prosecution of those responsible for the unnecessary use of violence'. The HSIU Board, which was becoming more or less synonymous with the government, countered by justifying the military action as an unavoidable act of safeguarding public security and chastised the University for failing to take appropriate measures to ensure respect for the law of the nation (Balsvik 1985: 270).

The university administration thus found itself between the pro-government Board, who found it too soft on the students, and the staff, who felt it had been too timid vis-à-vis the government. One of the members of the committee that drafted the Faculty Council resolution, Dr L.X. Tarpey, the Dean of the College of Business Administration, went to the extent of circulating a personal message condemning the act of the military as a 'serious crime against humanity' and asserting that those who chose to keep quiet in the face of such atrocity were indistinguishable from those who remained silent while Hitler exterminated six million Jews. He was declared *persona non grata* by the government and forced to leave the country within twenty-four hours. The director of the Peace Corps, Joseph Murphy, resigned after characterizing the regime as 'a repressive dictatorship which cannot establish a social order with better answers to its problems than shooting and beating young people' (ibid.: 271).

Here, it may be instructive to point out the differences in the style of leadership shown by the two successive Ethiopian presidents of the university: Kasa Woldemariam and Aklilu Habte. In a way, such a comparison is not entirely fair, as the latter presided over an increasingly intractable situation. As grandson-in-law of the emperor, Kasa also had greater confidence born of his easier access to the palace and greater clout within the power establishment. Nonetheless, many felt that Kasa was endowed with greater tact in handling the students and exceptional eloquence in the delivery of his message. Two incidents readily spring to mind. The first was the one already referred to in April 1967, when he nearly succeeded in persuading the rebellious students to go back to classes until the decisive intervention of Berhane Meskel Redda, who swayed the students in the opposite direction. The second was most probably later that year when students, rather uncharacteristically, were on the verge of deciding to boycott classes in protest at the deteriorating food service. He assembled the students at Christmas Hall, regaled them with his vision for the expansion of the university facilities and at the same time underscored the financial constraints under which he was operating. The boycott idea readily evaporated into thin air. By contrast, Aklilu preferred the coercion rather than the discussion mode, resorting all too readily to inviting police intervention to control student unrest. In effect, he had a hot line with the commander of the police, General Yilma Shibeshi. The increasingly preponderant role that the American academic vice-president, 'Dean' Paul, played in dealing with the students also tended to overshadow the president.

The days following the dramatic confrontation on 29 December witnessed mass protests throughout almost all high schools of the capital. The police report enumerates seventeen of them, where the Ethiopian flag was hoisted at half-mast and students were expressing their sorrow and anger at the assassination of the student leader by wailing in the traditional manner and chanting anti-government slogans. They were all given 'appropriate punishment', it concludes with a sense of accomplishment. The final paragraphs of the report contrast the concentration of student agitation in government schools and the relative quiescence of private and missionary ones. It then goes on to point an accusing finger at the university administration, the university alumni association and the faculty for failing to restrain the students, effectively describing them as accomplices in the student agitation. What is also interesting about this section of the report is that it speaks of eight years of agitation, suggesting that 1961, when the first indecorous poem was recited on College Day, may have been perceived by the government as the starting point of the student movement (IEGPF: 35-36).

As for the university students, they were too dazed by the brutal assault to react with the usual militancy. There were some half-hearted attempts to boycott classes in protest when the university reopened at the end of January 1970. The banning of the student unions and

publications, as well as the vigilance of the newly introduced university guards, made gatherings well-nigh impossible. Surprisingly enough, it was the senior students, traditionally not known for their radicalism as they had their eyes set on their post-graduation careers, who took the initiative in this. But their expectation that their unprecedented sacrifice would inspire the other students to follow their example proved groundless. All but the most militant slowly resumed classes. Many of those who did not wish to continue their university education fled the country, most of them escaping overland to the Sudan (Balsvik 1985: 271–2; Kiflu 1993: 71). Some of these eventually managed to go further to Europe and North America. Others took the more orthodox route (i.e. flying) abroad. Thus began the exodus of radicals that was to have such a dramatic impact on the complexion and direction of the student movement abroad.

The disagreement between the faculty and the Board on the interpretation of the 28–29 December events continued. At its meeting on 16 February 1970, the Board, chaired by the new minister of education, *Ato Seyfu Mahteme Sellassie*, had a discussion with a five-person committee representing the Faculty Council and led by Dr Akalu Wolde Mikael. Effectively, the two sides could be said to have agreed to disagree. The committee expressed its disappointment at the Board's one-sided interpretation of the events – blaming the students and saying nothing about the invasion of the campus by the military and the ensuing death of students and manhandling of staff. The committee argued that the Board, which was supposed to be a university body, had chosen to act like an external agent, and also took exception to the banning of student gatherings when the university was reopened, expressing its apprehension of invasions by the military in the future. The Board, in response, justified the entry of the Bodyguard on the ground that the situation had posed a serious threat to public security. Moreover, it reasoned, the Bodyguard was chosen because it was believed to have had a good reputation among the university community! The Board equally made light of the committee's objections to the decision to suspend and dismiss students and ban their publications, as well as the recruitment of university guards from outside. To the committee's challenge of the very constitutionality of the proclamation on public demonstrations, the Board countered that this was none of the committee's business (Board Minutes, 9.6.62/16.2.70).

In view of these developments, the lofty recommendations of the university commission set up to investigate the events of the two fateful days could hardly have had much acceptance, particularly from the Board and the government. The report of the commission was emphatic on respecting the autonomy of the university. In view of the difficulty of delineating the boundary between the responsibilities of the university and the government on many issues, however, the report urged close consultation between the two before any action was taken. While it insisted that students should respect the laws of the country, the government should at the same time respect the free exchange of

ideas on political and social issues, for that is the essence of all universities. Such tolerance of free expression of views is incumbent not only on the government and the university administration vis-à-vis students but also among students themselves (University Report: 11–14):

ታሪክ እንደሚያሳየው ታላላቅ የኒቨርሲቲዎች እውነትና ትክክለኛ አስተሳሰብ የሚስፋፋባቸው ቦታዎች ናቸው፡፡ በኃይል ለመጠቀም መሞከር የከፍተኛ ትምህርት ተቃራኒ ነው፡፡ በምንም ምክንያት ቢሆን እርስ በእርሳቸውም ሆነ በየኒቨርሲቲው ላይ በኃይል ለመጠቀም ወይም ለማስፈራራት የሚሹ ተማሪዎች ከየኒቨርሲቲው ኮሚቴ ውጭ እንዲሆኑ በራሳቸው ላይ የፈረዱ ሆነው መቆጠር አለባቸው፤ የኒቨርሲቲውም እንዲህ ያሉትን ተማሪዎች ከማስወገድ መቆጠብ የለበትም፡፡ ብዙዎች የየኒቨርሲቲ ተማሪዎች ያላቸው የፖለቲካ ስሜትና እንቅስቃሴ የታወቀ ነው፡፡ በጠቅላላው በፖለቲካ ነክና በሌሎች ጉዳዮች ላይ ነፃ በሆነ በበሰለ አእምሮና በሰላም የሚደረጉትን ውይይቶች ማገድ የየኒቨርሲቲውን መሠረታዊ ዓላማ መቃወም ነው፡፡

History shows that true knowledge emanates from great universities. Violence is thus antithetical to the principle of higher education. Students who under any circumstances use violence or intimidation against other students or the university should know that they had of their own accord excluded themselves from the university community; the university should not hesitate to dismiss such students. On the other hand, the political consciousness and involvement of most university students is well known. To deny the free and seasoned discussion of political and other national issues is therefore to undermine the basic foundation of a university.

As it turned out, such a plea for moderation and mutual understanding remained a cry in the wilderness.

The 28–29 December incident had reverberations in the ranks of the student movement abroad. The most violent reaction came from students in the Soviet Union, who raided the Ethiopian Embassy in Moscow on 29 December, smashing windows and causing other forms of damage to property. The occupation of the Ethiopian Embassy in Sweden has already been described above. ESUNA also reacted to the events in Ethiopia with indignation. In a statement it issued on 30 December, ESUNA described the events leading to the final crisis: the deceptive clemency and ostensibly liberal attitude of the regime, the scrupulous avoidance of confrontation by the students, and the propaganda campaign that formed the prelude to the government assault. It then cited in detail BBC and AFP news reports on the incident and called on ESUNA chapters to hold emergency meetings to deliberate on the situation. This was followed by an eyewitness report of the events, which concludes that ‘The massacre of December 29th is the most bloody repression unleashed against the Ethiopian Student Movement to date’ (ESUNA Statement, 30.12.69).

Inside Ethiopia, the 1969 showdown marked a decisive turning point in the student movement. The militant university students took either of two options. Quite a few, as we have seen above, chose to go abroad to continue the struggle by other means, including ultimately armed struggle, which had increasingly come to be seen as the only

way of overthrowing the hated system. Those who stayed behind started forming clandestine discussion groups as building blocks to the proletarian party that was deemed essential to bring the struggle to its logical conclusion. The annual demonstrations and rallies around a major national issue are not much in evidence after 1969. Confrontation between students and the government tended to revolve around the anniversaries of the assassination of Tilahun Gizaw. Thus, there was a tense build up to the second anniversary on 28 December 1971, with the campus guards taking such measures as infiltrating student ranks with plain-clothes men in order to gather information about student plans, and whitewashing slogans painted in red at night (IESWM 16, 3.5.63/11.1.71). What made the second anniversary doubly significant was that it was preceded a few months earlier by the death in the United States of another militant and former secretary-general of USUAA, Mesfin Habtu. Students suspended classes to attend his funeral in Addis (IESWM 17, Board Minutes, February 1972). These anniversaries gave the movement one of the most popular chants, with insertions of the names of various martyrs other than Tilahun, for whom it was primarily composed, to prolong the chanting.¹⁷

A newsletter published in December 1970 by the New York Chapter of the new ESUNA was largely dedicated to a commemoration of what it called 'the December 1969 Massacre'. The newsletter began with an editorial entitled 'No Royal Road to Freedom' and featured a main article on the 'significance of the December 1969 Massacre to the Revolutionary Ethiopian Movement', a shorter piece by 'a Comrade in Algeria' on the 'The Lessons of December 1969', and what it characterized as an eyewitness account. The feature article began with a survey of the student movement from 1960 to 1970, highlighting the transition from its reformist phase of petitioning to its transformation into a revolutionary movement after 1965. It saw December 1969 as the opening of 'a new era of unprecedented savagery and brutality in Ethiopia' and 'the protracted liberation struggle to defeat Feudo-Fascism and Imperialism'. The days of 'peaceful mass protests and demonstrations' were now over, for 'the guns that roared in December 1969 . . . must be recognized as the baptism by fire of the emergent Ethiopian revolution'. It concluded with the following ringing call for revolutionary violence:

it must be clearly understood that the student movement will have to be superceded by a mass-based movement. When the student movement is transformed into a mass-based movement, when spontaneity is transformed into consciousness, when disorderly struggle is transformed into systematic struggle, student organizations will be transformed into a professional revolutionary organization and a part-time student leadership into a professional full-time leadership . . . We recognize that there is only one way to liberation and that is revolutionary violence . . . Seize the Time! And seize the Gun!
(ESUNA Newsletter, December 1970)

The short piece by the 'comrade in Algeria' linked the student killings with the 'ruthless mopping up operation' in Bale, where a peasant rebellion had been going on since the early 1960s, and underscored 'the need for an anti-feudal and anti-imperialist front' led by what it called 'a vanguard of . . . revolutionaries who will take up the gun and join the fighting masses'. The 'eye witness account'¹⁸ described the background to the assassination of Tilahun Gizaw and actually alleged that the surgeon who was preparing to operate the wounded student leader pronounced him dead a few minutes after he had received a telephone call from the palace. It even ventured to place the event in a national and global historical context, drawing parallels 'with the 1936 massacre of defenseless Ethiopian people by fascist Italy and on an international level with the Sharpsville massacre of South African civilians in 1960' (*ibid.*).¹⁹

In the early 1970s, it was high school students who increasingly came to the fore in the struggle for change. In a sense, this has already been presaged by the student protests of early 1969, which had actually started in high schools. The pattern continued in subsequent years and reached a climax in 1972. In May 1971, high school students rose in protest at the increase in bus fares, later escalating into violent attacks on city buses and the luxurious cars of the rich. They then set up a vigil on the grain market to enforce a price that was affordable to the poor. This drew them considerable sympathy from the public, including the police, who had to be replaced by the army to enforce order (Alem 1990: 86; Fentahun 1990: 75).

Nor was this agitation confined to the capital. Similar protests erupted in many provincial towns, such as Ambo, Dabra Berhan, Debre Zeit, Dessie, Nazareth, and Naqamte. The nation-wide agitation was paralleled by organizational sophistication, including the formation of a supreme council to co-ordinate the activities of the various student councils. The student protests were apparently so effective that a foreign observer is reported to have commented, with some understandable exaggeration, that the high school students had managed to do more in three weeks than their university colleagues had been able to do in five years in conveying the message of the student movement to the public at large (Balsvik 1985: 299–301; Legesse 1979: 37). He was not alone. The South African journalist and writer, Colin Legum, described the protests as 'the most spectacular demonstrations ever to occur in the 40 years that the 78-year old Emperor has been on the throne' (quoted in Alem 1990: 86). A leaflet circulated by the students themselves and entitled 'The Progressive Movement of Ethiopian Students' also asserted that the 1969 student movement was led from start to finish by high school students and went on to claim that the

¹⁸ It actually erroneously dates the assassination to 29 December, an error that could well have arisen from the conversion of the date from the Ethiopian to the Gregorian calendar.

¹⁹ The first was presumably a reference to the Graziani Massacre, which actually took place in 1937, not in 1936.

'reactionary regime' has not met such a formidable opposition since the abortive coup of 1960. The reason for this impact, it elaborated, was because high school students had closer interaction with the general public (ESUNA Newsletter, December 1970).

Among the most active high schools in this regard was the Wayzaro Sehin Comprehensive Secondary School in Dessie. A list of some of the students who passed through this school reads like a *Who's Who* in radical politics: Berhane Meskel Redda, Negede Gobeze, Tilahun Gizaw and Walelign Mekonnen (Tesfaye Gebreab 2002 EC: 262–3).²⁰ Although student protests at that school had predated the national wave of the early 1970s, it was then that boycotts and demonstrations became a regular feature of school life. In 1971, some three thousand students of Wayzaro Sehin and Hote schools had come out with slogans of 'Land to the Tiller!' and 'Bread for the Hungry!' Some sixteen students were believed to have died in the ensuing clashes with the police; the police commissioner, Brigadier General Abbebe Welde Sellassie, was also wounded. Another wave of student agitation followed the death of Walelign during the hijacking incident in December 1972. Twenty-one students who had tried to march from Dessie to the Kombolcha airport to receive the corpse were intercepted along the way and detained until the burial was completed (Gashaw 2002: 8–20; Legesse 1979: 40).

In the capital itself, university students were joined by students of Menilek II, Prince Makonnen, Tafari Makonnen and General Wingate schools in stopping classes and holding rallies in solidarity with the slain hijackers. Students of Menilek II and Tafari Makonnen schools caused damage on buses and an American Embassy car while students of General Wingate School laid a wreath on the tomb of Marta Mebratu, who was buried in the Catholic and Protestant cemetery nearby. The protests subsequently spread to Shimelis Habte, Nafas Selk Comprehensive and Madhane Alam schools (NAL 297/3/2708/1). Indeed, the persistent agitation of high school students triggered a multiplicity of police reports during the period 1972–74, describing the protests and the ensuing damage to property in considerable detail. An example is the protests that were sparked off by students of Grade 11B of the Azmach Dalgahan Comprehensive High School in Bale in April 1973. The minutes of the parents' committee that was held to defuse the situation alone came to some forty-six pages (NAL 297/3/2708/4).

The university students joined the struggle in 1972, more in solidarity with their high school counterparts than to advance their own cause. Although the Ministry of Education, taking its cue from the effective role that the student organizations have played the previous year, had prevented the formation of student councils in high schools, students continued to protest with demands calling for the release of their detained colleagues and postponement of the

²⁰ Tesfaye also includes the EPLF leader, Isayyas Afeworki, in the list, though there is no corroborative evidence for this.

ESLC examinations. Girmachew Lemma, president of the newly reconstituted USUAA, reportedly developed links with the high schools students, notably with a student leader of Asfa Wasan Comprehensive Secondary School by the name of Dawit Toga. USUAA was believed to have furnished the students with the duplicating machine for their pamphlets. This was followed by yet another banning of USUAA and arrests first of USUAA officials and then of a large number of students, who were detained in distant desert camps in southwestern and southeastern Ethiopia. The HSIU Board, in justifying its banning of USUAA, underscored the growing links between the organization and the high school students. It also pointed to the increasing stridency of its demands, including broaching the idea of observing Muslim holidays, introducing the practice of swearing by Marxism-Leninism at inauguration ceremonies for newly elected USUAA officials, and hoisting the Ethiopian flag at half-mast on the anniversary of Tila-hun's death (Board Minutes, February 1972; Balsvik 1985: 301-2; Legesse 1979: 37).

Not until 1973, with the outbreak of famine in northern Ethiopia, do we see university students again raising a major issue of nationwide significance. Even that initiative originally came from university staff members. On 14 April, three staff members (Abraham Demoz, Alula Abate and Getatchew Haile) submitted a report of their visit to the famine-stricken area, describing the state of the refugees along the Kombolcha-Waldya road. They deplored not only the absence of any government relief effort but also the deliberate belittling of the problem:

ርዳታ የሚያቀርበውን የከተማውን ሕዝብ መንፈስ ገድሎ የቀረበው (የቀበረው?) “ችግሩ እስከዚህም አይደለም” የሚለው በመገናኛ ዘዴዎች የተነገረው የባለ ሥልጣኖች መግለጫ ነው፡፡ “ይህ ንግግር” ይላሉ ሰዎች ሲናገሩ “ሁለት አፍ ያለው ሰይፍ ነው፡፡ በአንዱ ስለት የመንግሥትን ርዳታ ሲያዘገይበት በሌላው ስለቱ የመጽዋቹን እጅ አኮማትሮታል፡፡” (IES CL 2402/01/2)

What has undermined the efforts of the urban population to come to the relief of the famine victims is the statement of government officials in the media that ‘the problem is not so serious’. ‘Such a statement’, the local people go on to say, ‘is a double-edged sword delaying government relief effort and at the same time stifling private relief’.

The team subsequently displayed photos of the famished peasants, in somewhat the same manner as students had done just before the Shola camp demonstration in 1966.

Students reacted to the disaster instantaneously, trying to assemble to address the problem. In the first manifestation of the government's determination to hide the famine that was ultimately to spell its demise, students were confronted with concerted attacks by university guards and police who had invaded the campus. Only a few students who managed to escape the assault and ran out of campus were able to

send across the message of the famine victims to the populace. More concretely, students gave up their breakfast as contribution to the famine relief fund that was set up inside the university (Balsvik 1985: 303). On 18 May 1973, the HSIU Famine Relief Committee,²¹ composed of two staff members and eight students, submitted a report on its trip to the famine-stricken area to distribute grain bought with the money collected from staff and students who had given up breakfast for fifty-seven days. The committee distributed a total of 2489 quintals²² of grain to 27,678 people in Wollo and Tigray at a total cost of about Eth\$67,000 (*ibid.*).

The famine had a catalytic effect on the student movement abroad as well. This author recalls the wave of indignation that swept across the student community, particularly after the broadcasting of Jonathan Dimbleby's harrowing documentary on the (British) Independent Television News in late 1973. Ethiopian students in London organized a charity dinner at the Africa Centre both to raise funds for the victims and to expose a regime that could allow such a tragedy to happen. The ESUNA pamphlet cited above, entitled *Repression in Ethiopia*, was distributed to the invited guests, precipitating a walkout by the Ethiopian chargé d'affaires, who accused the organizers of exploiting a natural calamity for political ends. He need not have bothered with that gesture, for the Rasta band that had volunteered to perform for the occasion effectively undid the student agitation by chanting laudatory songs to their Jah (Haile Sellassie)! Abebech, president of the newly constituted World Wide Federation of Ethiopian Students, also recalls that her major task at that time was pooling together the funds collected by various student unions abroad and channeling them home.

The famine continued to trigger further student agitation inside the country. As a government security report of 21 November 1973 makes it clear, student activists skilfully intertwined agitation for the restoration of the banned USUAA with campaigning for greater support to the famine victims. At a meeting held on 20 November at the Seddest Kilo campus, some six hundred students reiterated their demand for the restoration of USUAA and agreed to explore ways of augmenting their support to the famine victims. It is also of interest that the security report refers to the growing number of faculty members who were giving the students moral support, singling out by name Drs Assefa Bequele and Eshetu Chole of the Department of Economics and Ato Meteku Ashebir of the Faculty of Education. While it was categorical about the socialist orientations of the two economists, it was relatively more accommodating of Dr Abraham Demoz, a linguist and former dean of the Faculty of Arts. Although he might have indirectly encouraged student agitation by resigning from the University famine relief

²¹ Known as the 'Darg' in Amharic, showing once again that the use of the term *darg* pre-dated its more famous application to the committee of soldiers that came to the forefront of the revolutionary process in 1974, cf. Chapter 4: 112.

²² About 113 tonnes.

committee complaining of the inadequacy of its activity, the report argued, he was known to be averse to socialist ideology. Even more interestingly, in light of the military mutinies that were looming in the horizon, the report hinted at the possibility of the students and staff continuing in their agitation emboldened as they were by soldiers' growing estrangement with the government over the issue of pay and the concern of the general public over the Wollo famine (NAL 297/62/2708/1/60).

The premonition of the security report was not entirely unfounded. For, it was not long before the university faculty began to intervene in national politics in even more organized fashion. With the eruption of the February 1974 popular upsurge, the Ethiopian University Teachers Association (EUTA) abandoned its customarily cautious stance and assumed the role of articulating the disparate popular grievances. This became particularly evident in a declaration that it issued on 3 March. In a nine-page statement, it explained the genesis of the popular upsurge, ridiculed the cosmetic change or cabinet reshuffle that the regime had introduced to stem the popular tide and outlined what a future people's government should look like. In the final pages of its statement, EUTA listed a catalogue of demands, including the replacement of the newly appointed Prime Minister, Endalkachew Makonnen, with a popularly elected leader, the revision of the constitution by a popularly elected constituent assembly, immediate concession to the popular demands for freedom of expression, information, assembly and association, and implementation of land reform by putting a ceiling to private land holdings (NAL, 297/62/2708).

Championing the Cause of the Marginalized: the National Question and the Woman Question

We believe that the support of the right to secession will, by itself, discourage secession.¹

There is general consensus that the driving force behind the Ethiopian student movement was rejection of oppression in all its forms. The protests and demonstrations that started to peak after 1965 were directed against one manifestation or another of that oppression. The ‘Land to the Tiller’ demonstration of 1965 had as its objective economic and social equity in the exploitation of the country’s most important social and economic asset – land. In 1966, students rose in defence of the poor who were herded in shelters that were considered sub-human. The 1967 demonstration was in protest at the curtailment of the freedom of expression and assembly. The nation-wide protests of 1969, under the slogan of ‘Education for All’ drew attention to the increasing constraints placed on the poor sectors of society in educating their children. It is not surprising, therefore, that, starting in that same year, students began to turn their attention to two major glaring manifestations of social inequality: the oppression of nationalities and of women. That was the genesis of the two questions that came to have a prominent place in the student movement in the 1970s: the national question and the woman question.

THE NATIONAL QUESTION

Historical background

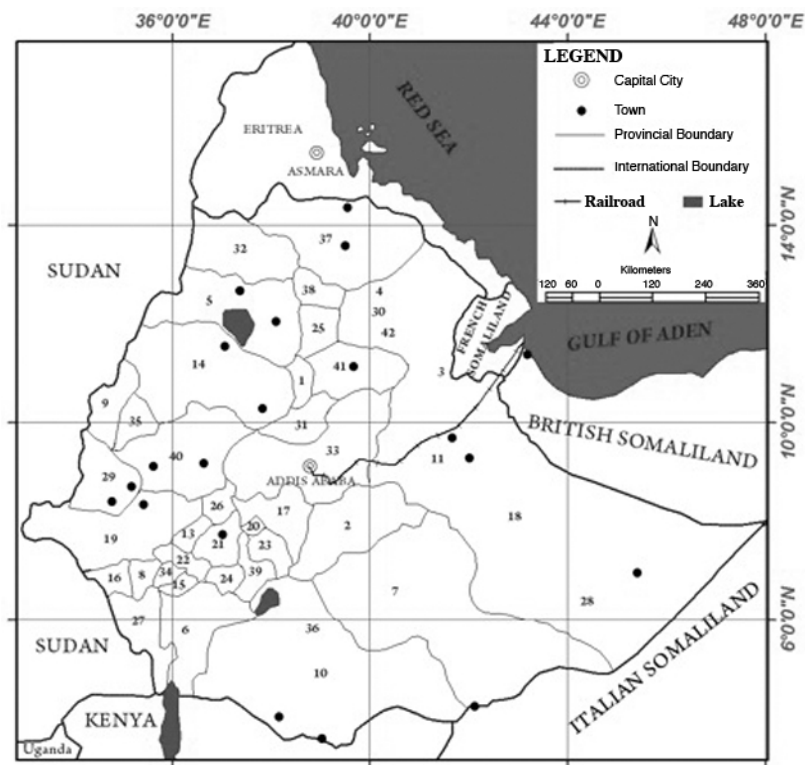
What was variously referred to as ‘the national question’ or ‘the question of nationalities’ came to be a predominant concern in the Ethiopian student movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As we now know, it has become a cardinal element of the political ideology and configuration of post-1991 Ethiopia. Popular movements of ethno-nationalist vintage have been evident since 1941, notably in the First Wayane in

¹ Tilahun Takele, ‘The National Question (“Regionalism”) in Ethiopia’, 1970: 32.

Tigray in 1941–43, the activities of the Mecha-Tulama Oromo self-help association and the Bale uprising in 1964–70. Yet, when one examines the publications of student associations at home or abroad, one could say that there was little to prepare one for the force with which the question burst onto the realm of student politics in the late 1960s and the resilience it has shown since.

Emperor Menilek (r. 1889–1913) is rightly credited with the creation of modern Ethiopia, a process that he had begun years before he was crowned emperor. Through successive stages of expansion that lasted from about 1875 to 1898, he had given Ethiopia more or less its present shape, a shape that was sanctified through a series of boundary agreements that he signed with the neighbouring colonial powers between 1897 and 1908. Just as his territorial expansion combined diplomatic persuasion and brute force, his administration of the newly incorporated provinces was also a mixture of recognition of regional hereditary rule and administration by governors directly appointed by him. Thus, regions that submitted to him peacefully – such as the Oromo monarchies of the Gibe region and the Leqa principalities in Wallaga – had their local rulers confirmed in their positions, sometimes with the bestowing of such Ethiopian titles as *dajjazmach*. The classic case of recognition of internal autonomy was that of Jimma Abba Jiffar, where Menilek punctiliously respected not only the political but also the religious autonomy of the region, binding himself to refrain from settling northerners in the region or building churches in Jiren, the capital. Conversely, regions that had resisted his military expansion – such as Arsi, Kafa, Harar and Walayta – were subjected to harsh punitive expeditions followed by imposition of settlers culminating in most instances in the alienation of land as well as the appointment of governors from outside.

Yet, as is evident from Map 1, the Ethiopia that Menilek left behind was a relatively decentralized entity. The provincial designations generally reflected authentic historical entities. The northern provinces like Gojjam and Tigray were ruled by hereditary rulers, the latter by two branches of Emperor Yohannes's progeny. Even the provinces that were governed by appointees of the central government were given a great deal of latitude. Given the poor level of infrastructure at the time, the picture could not have been otherwise. It was only during the regency of Ras Tafari Makonnen and in the first five years of the reign of Haile Sellassie that the process began that was to develop into full-fledged centralization after 1941. The Battle of Sagale (1916) disposed of one of the most powerful hereditary rulers of northern Ethiopia, *Negus* Mikael, paving the way for the appointment of the eldest son of Tafari Makonnen, Asfa Wasan, as governor Wallo. The centralization process gained momentum with the introduction of what were called 'model provinces' (Charchar, Gera, and Guma), the replacement of Ras Gugsa Wale of Bagemder by Ras Kasa Haylu after the former was defeated and killed at the Battle of Anchem in March 1930, the appointment of Ras Emeru Haile Sellassie

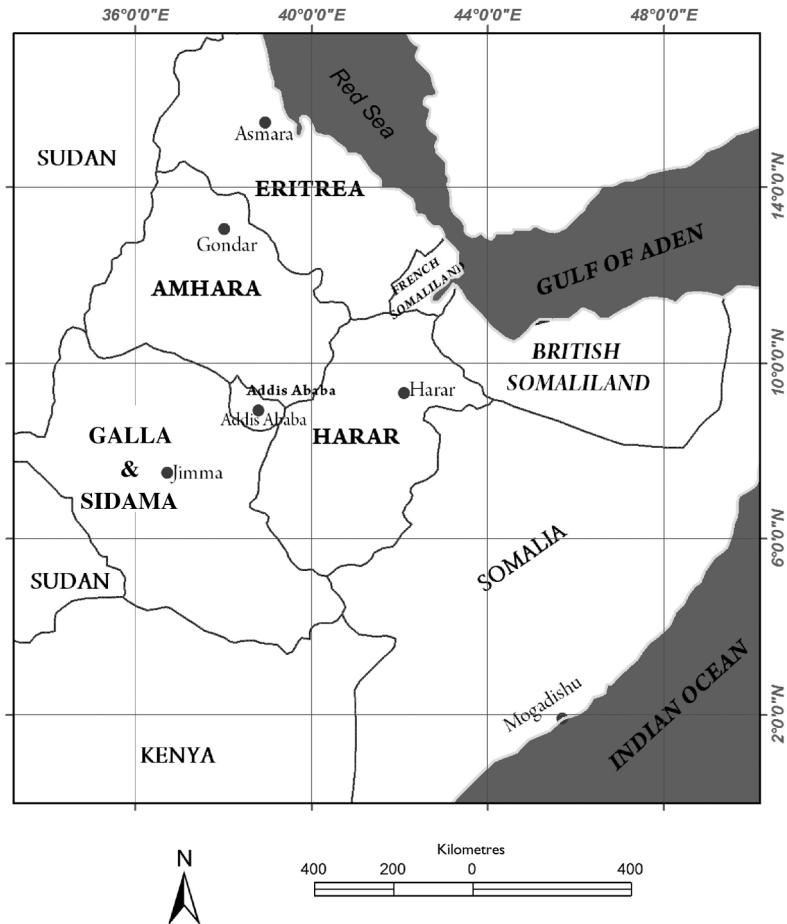


PROVINCIAL NAME

No	Name	No	Name	No	Name
1	Amhara Sayent	15	Goldeya	29	Qellam
2	Arusi	16	Guar-Farda	30	Rayya
3	Awsa	17	Gurage	31	Salale
4	Azabo	18	Harar	32	Semen
5	Bagemder	19	Illubabor	33	Shawa
6	Bako	20	Janjaro	34	Shawa-Gimira
7	Bale	21	Jimma	35	Sibu
8	Banesso	22	Kafa	36	Sidamo
9	Bela Shangul	23	Kambata	37	Tegre
10	Borana	24	Kullo Konta	38	Wag
11	Charchar	25	Lasta	39	Wallayta
13	Gera	26	Limmu	40	Wallaga
14	Gojjam	27	Maji	41	Wallo
		28	Ogaden	42	Yajju

Map 1 Ethiopia, 1935

(Reproduced from Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855–1991*: 86)



Map 2 Italian East Africa, 1936–1941
(Reproduced from Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855–1991*: 161)

as governor of Gojjam following the disgrace of the hereditary governor, *Ras* Haylu Tekle Haymanot, in 1932, and the termination of the autonomy of Jimma Abba Jiffar subsequent to the death of its legendary ruler, Abba Jiffar II, in the same year. Indeed, by the time of the Italian invasion of 1935, the only hereditary provincial rulers were *Dajjazmach* Habte Maryam Gabre Egziabher of Leqa Naqamte,² *Ras* Seyoum Mengesha of Western Tigray and *Dajjach* Haile Sellassie Gugsu of Eastern Tigray.

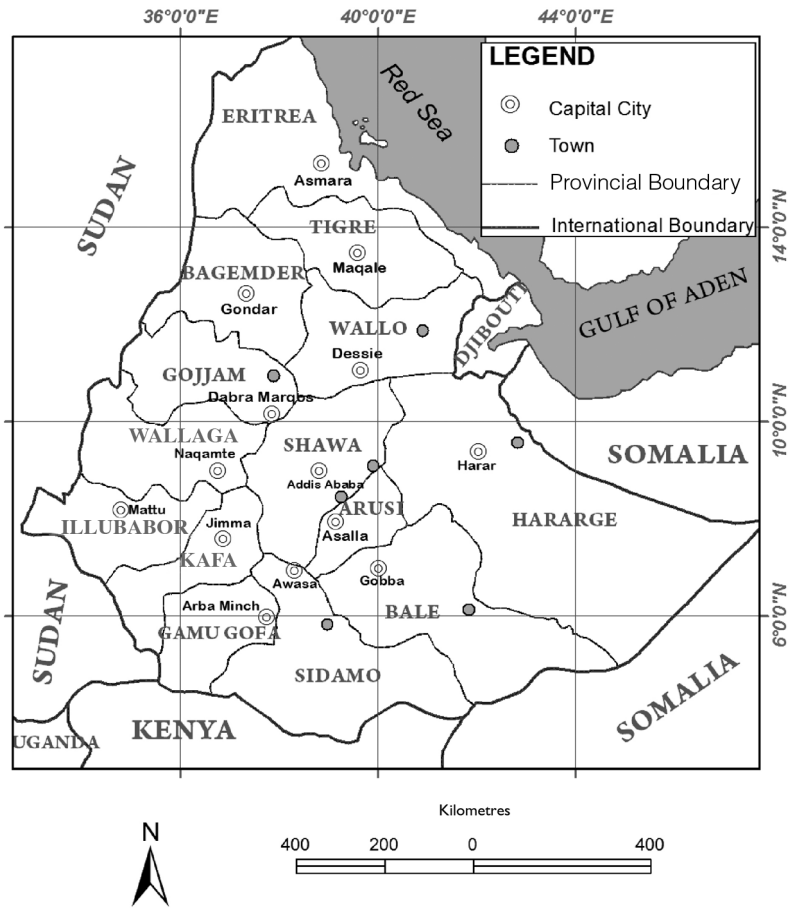
The Italian Occupation (1936–41), brief though it was, did not pass

² The other Oromo principality in Wallaga, Leqa Qellam, had come under central government control as early as 1918 owing to the turbulent relationship that its hereditary ruler, *Dajjazmach* Jote Tulu, had with Addis Ababa (Bahru 1970).

without leaving a trace on the political geography of the country. Subsequent to the realization of their perennial dream of conquering Ethiopia, the Italians merged it with their colonies of Eritrea and Somaliland to forge their belated colonial empire, which they christened Africa Orientale Italiana (Italian East Africa). A distinctive feature of the new political configuration was strict adherence to the principle of ethnic identity, a principle evoked less out of concern for self-determination than in line with the old adage *divide et impera* ('divide and rule'). That was the rationale that led to the merger of the hitherto distinct regional entities into five mega-regions divided along ethno-linguistic lines, alongside the vice-regal capital Addis Ababa (later renamed Shawa): Eritrea (merging their colony by that name with the ethnically and linguistically related northern Ethiopian province of Tigray); Amhara, a large swathe of territory bringing together all the Amharic-speaking provinces; Somalia (merging Italian Somaliland and the Ethiopian Somali-speaking region known as the Ogaden); Harar (a much subdued entity compared to the pre-1935 configuration because of the merger of the Ogaden with Italian Somaliland); and Galla (Oromo) and Sidama (a sort of mishmash designed to define 'the rest'). As it turned out, this Italian configuration was to foreshadow the ethnic-federal setup that was adopted in post-1991 Ethiopia, including the similarly diffuse categories of 'Galla e Sidama' in the Italian setup, and 'Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region' or Southern Region in the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front one.³

Following his restoration to the throne in 1941, Emperor Haile Sellassie redrew the political boundaries of the provinces in a manner that was a kind of compromise between the many small districts of pre-1935 and the mega ethno-linguistic categories of the Italian Occupation period. Harar more than regained its pre-1935 territorial extent, as the province of Bale was also added to it until its separation in a subsequent administrative reshuffling. Unlike the pre-1935 situation, but very much like the Italian period, a highly centralized administration came to be instituted, even though the hereditary prerogatives of the two local dynasties cited above – the Leqa Qellam and the Tigrayan – were to remain. Thus, despite his fleeting flirtation with the Fascist Italian rulers, Ras Seyoum was reinstated in Tigray and remained in charge until he was killed along with the other hostages during the abortive 1960 coup; he was then succeeded by his son Mengesha Seyoum, who remained governor of the province until the eruption of the 1974 revolution. Wallaga, as the province merging the two historic Leqa principalities (Naqamte and Qellam) and the Watawit sheikhdoms to the west had come to be known, was governed successively by descendants of Habte Maryam and Jote – *Dajjach* Feqre Sellassie Habte Maryam, son of the former, and *Dajjach* Kasa Wolde Mariam, grandson of the latter.

³ It was this uncanny resemblance that inspired an Amharic translation by Emshaw Alemayehu of Alberto Sbacchi's book, *Ethiopia under Mussolini* by Emshaw Alemayehu: *Ityopya Baltalya Fascistoch Yawarara Amatat* (1928–1933).



Map 3 Ethiopia, 1974

(Reproduced from Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855–1991*: 190)

These two cases formed the exception rather than the rule, for the provincial administration proclamation of 1943 envisaged the centralization of all provincial administration, with the Ministry of Interior as the all-powerful ministry to which all provincial governors reported. These governors had the rather honorific title of governor-general, probably to set them apart from their subordinates, the district governors. Interestingly enough, their title was later changed to *endarase*, emphasizing perhaps that they were mere surrogates of the emperor and as such exercising authority on his behalf. The provincial order of 1943 also involved the restructuring of provincial boundaries, resulting in the consolidation of the forty-two pre-1935 provinces into twelve larger administrative units. The number increased to fourteen, when Eritrea, an autonomous unit within Ethiopia was annexed in 1962 and the large and rather unwieldy Hararge province was broken up into two, Bale and Harar.

Parallel with this reconfiguration of the provinces was a policy of cultural assimilation. An element of assimilation had accompanied the formation of the modern Ethiopian state under Emperor Menilek. But, as argued elsewhere in connection with the dominant role of the Amharic language (Bahru 2008: 77–95), the process was initially more spontaneous than enforced as a matter of policy; it accompanied the political and religious dominance of the ruling elite and the growth of an urban culture. A more systematic policy of establishing Amharic as the dominant language came with its establishment as the official language of the country in the Revised Constitution of 1955, and its replacement of English as the medium of instruction in elementary schools in 1963. Indeed, the school system and the military served as two important institutions for the promotion of a pan-Ethiopian identity.

The regional and ethno-nationalist movements that confronted the imperial regime in the post-1941 period cannot all be reduced merely to one of resistance to the process of centralization and cultural assimilation. It would indeed be erroneous to give one simple explanation for all these movements. Thus, the First Wayane, although it had a clearly ethno-nationalist character, was couched in millenarian terms harking back to the memory of Emperor Yohannes IV. It was an expression of the resentment of the subsequent marginalization of Tigray and the uncertain fate of its hereditary ruler, *Ras Seyoum*, in the immediate post-Liberation period. The Gojjam and Bale peasant uprisings, although they too had (respectively) regional and ethno-nationalist manifestations, essentially revolved around issues of land and taxation.⁴ Even the Mecha-Tulama Association, which later on became the springboard for the expression of Oromo nationalism, started as a self-help association for the development of the Oromo-speaking parts of Ethiopia through the development of educational, health and communication facilities.

⁴ See Gebru (1991) for details on these peasant uprisings.

Initially, it included in its membership non-Oromo Ethiopians as well as Oromo (Olana 1985 EC).

Ultimately, the centralization drive of the imperial order was to have its most disastrous consequence in Eritrea. As is now common knowledge, the United Nations, in an effort to reconcile the antithetical positions of Eritreans calling for complete union with Ethiopia and those campaigning for Eritrean independence, federated Eritrea with Ethiopia in 1952. As a matter of fact, the federal arrangement was not the conventional type of federation between two equal parties but rather one that set up Eritrea as an autonomous unit under the Ethiopian sovereign. But even this attenuated formula was unpalatable to the centralizing monarch. In this, he was fortified by the Unionists, who were equally if not more adamantly opposed to the Federation. The upshot was the gradual erosion of the autonomous status of Eritrea, culminating in the dissolution of the Federation by an act of the Eritrean Parliament in 1962. Already in 1961, armed struggle against the steady imposition of direct Ethiopian rule had started in the western plains of Eritrea. Given the centrality that this armed struggle was to assume in the framing and resolution of the national question in the Ethiopian student movement, the dissolution of the Ethio-Eritrean Federation was indeed a fateful decision.

Early recipes

The reformist intellectuals of the early twentieth century, the 'pioneers of change', were the first group of Ethiopians who had to tackle, sometimes tangentially, at other times frontally, what later came to be known as the national question. This has been dealt with in some detail in an earlier study (Bahru 2002: 130–5). Here, only a short recap of that investigation will be given, highlighting the major findings. The writings and concerns of the pioneers could be seen under two categories: those dealing with the Abyssinian core (Amhara, Tigray and highland Eritrea) and those dealing with the more recently incorporated ethnic groups, such as the Gurage and the Oromo. In the former category, Gebre Heywet Baykedagn, the leading light of the group, was primarily concerned with the fate of his home province, Tigray, lamenting both the suffering it endured in the post-Yohannes period and emphasizing its centrality to the country. Conversely, Afewerq Gebre Yesus, in his ingratiating biography of Menilek, was vituperative not only towards Emperor Tewodros but also Emperor Yohannes in particular and the Tigreans in general. Gabre Egziabher Gila Maryam, an Eritrean, was unsparing in his condemnation of Emperor Menilek for his failure to consummate the Adwa victory by driving the Italians out of Eritrea.

To the second category belong an editorial and an article that appeared in *Berhanena Salam*, the veritable organ of the pioneers, showing special concern for the derogatory connotation that the name 'Gurage' had come to assume, particularly in its general use to summon

porters. This, the writers argued, did great injustice to the industry and skill of the people concerned. When it came to the major southern ethnic group, the Oromo, the most sympathetic treatment of them came from the person who wrote their history, Atsme Giyorgis. Although he did not use the term himself, he did point out that the Oromo, who were known by the term 'Galla', actually referred to themselves as Oromo. But the most extensive treatment, if from an unabashedly chauvinist perspective, came from Tedla Haile⁵, who was primarily driven by the imperative of their assimilation. The MA thesis that he submitted to the Colonial University of Antwerp in Belgium had an unambiguous title: '*Pourquoi et comment pratiquer une politique d'assimilation en Ethiopie*' ('The Why and How of Practising a Policy of Assimilation in Ethiopia'). After identifying the Amhara and the Oromo as the two major ethnic groups in Ethiopia, he saw the country's future salvation in the assimilation of the Oromo by the Amhara through two main agencies: the educational system and the military.

When we come to the subject of the present study, the first intimation of what one might call a deconstructionist approach to the concept of Ethiopian unity appeared in the course of a debate on Ethiopian history in *News and Views* in the early months of 1962. The debate opened with a piece by a certain Abdurazak 'On the Teaching of Ethiopian History', wherein he advocated a selective teaching of the Ethiopian past to avoid the moments of friction between ethnic and religious groups in order to 'foster national feeling' (NV, V: 21). To this Sven Rubenson, a history lecturer, responded by writing that such a deliberately selective manner of teaching history was tantamount to 'intellectual dishonesty' (NV, V: 22).⁶ The most interesting piece came some issues later in a belated response to Rubenson. It was written by one Khadir Muhammad, who not only challenged Rubenson's claim that the teaching of Ethiopian history at the university was not selective but went on to express his dissent from the general chorus of unity on campus in the following emphatic terms:

we must bear in mind that 'unity' is not something that should be imposed on the various sectors of the population living within a given political boundary. It is rather something which must willingly be accepted by the different groups of the whole population. 'Unity' achieved otherwise is short-lived and brittle. Real 'unity' cannot be achieved by formulating false and self-defeating hypotheses, such as, for example, the theory that tries to prove that there are no privileged tribes which impose social, political, economic and legal injustice on other oppressed tribes in certain independent African states. (NV, V: 26)⁷

⁵ Or, to give the full name that he gave himself, Tedla Haile Modja Guername.

⁶ This is one of the rare instances where a faculty member wrote his views in the student paper. With the literary magazine, *Something*, it was much more common.

⁷ Note the general African rather than specific Ethiopian thrust at the very end. It is not clear whether this was an ingenious attempt on the part of the author to avoid any possible retribution or whether he had the general African picture in mind from the outset.

We have to wait another four years before we encounter a similar discordant note in the chorus of national unity. One of the poems selected for recital on College Day in 1966 (by this time University Day) was a poem entitled 'The Ethiopian, who is he?' by an Oromo student, Ibsa Gutama. The poet asks whether it was the Oromo,⁸ the Amhara, the Tigre, the Gurage, the Walayta, the Konta, the Anuak or the Guji who qualifies to be called Ethiopian. A closer look at the rather badly constructed poem reveals, however, that the author's concern was more Ethiopian than ethnic or sectarian. He expresses dismay at people invoking regional and ethnic identities in lieu of the pan-Ethiopian one. In this pursuit of Ethiopian identity, no one is spared from admonishment: the 'child student' who roams the streets chanting 'Land to the Tiller' as well as the riot police who clobbers child and grown-up alike, the Marxist-Leninist who knows more about Asia than about his country as well as the blind supporter and imitator of the West.

Overall, as suggested above, until the national question suddenly burst onto the national stage in 1969, there was little to indicate that Ethiopian students were even remotely considering the kind of radical solution that was to be the norm after 1969. Thus, in February 1963, Guta Sirnessa, another Oromo student who was to be one of the presidential candidates two years later, was writing in the student paper *News and Views* urging the 'abolition of tribal feelings'. He went on to elaborate that 'there still exists a tribal feeling which weakens our strength by creating regionalism and separatism. I believe that Ethiopian institutions of higher learning have been and will be the nucleus of nationalism as they have been producing intelligentsia who clearly see the dangers of separatism and the vital necessity of unity' (NV, VIII: 2). Nor were these concerns confined to individuals. The national union, NUEUS, at its 6th congress in March 1967, came out with resolutions that roundly condemned what it called 'sectarian movements' in Ethiopia as inimical to 'the erection of a national democratic front'. It described such movements as instruments for the designs of 'bourgeois and reactionary forces' and denounced such forces in the Middle East as well as other 'accomplices of imperialism' which were poised to exploit such situations.

What probably prompted such musings was the existence of ethnic tension among students. In May 1967, such tension degenerated into violent confrontation between Eritrean and non-Eritrean students at the Prince Be'ede Maryam Laboratory School, a pilot institution established to prepare promising high school students for entrance into the Education Faculty of the Haile Sellassie I University. It started with a quarrel between two students on the football pitch and then spilled over into the dormitories. A number of the students involved in the fracas were detained by the police and, in the words of the then dean of the Faculty of Education, subjected to 'a program of physical

⁸ Ibsa actually uses the term 'Galla', which was in common usage at the time. Likewise he uses the term 'Wollamo' rather than the currently more correct 'Walayta'.

work, calisthenics' and other measures meant 'to further [their] "Ethiopianisation"' (UR, I: 22). Similar incidents had taken place at General Wingate Secondary School in Addis Ababa and the Teacher Training Institute at Harar. What fanned such ethnic tensions could well be the slurs and abusive epithets that one group was wont to throw at another. Very often, though, those slurs and epithets were exchanged in jocular fashion and did not lead to quarrels. For instance, a common belief among central Ethiopians was that the 'Tigre' (as both Eritreans and Tigreans were then known) used to eat the grasshoppers that regularly invaded their territory. An Eritrean who grew up in Addis Ababa wrote in the university literary journal, *Something*, that, intrigued by the allegation, she conducted an experiment to see if there was any truth in it. The result: no sooner had she roasted a bed-sheet full of grasshoppers and eaten them than she vomited (*Something*, 7)!

The conscious effort to contain the perils of ethnicity continued in student writings both at home and abroad well into 1968. Thus, in April 1968, in a long essay that traces Ethiopian history from the earliest times to the 1931 constitution, Jalata Ibsa argued in the Ethiopian Students Union in Europe (ESUE) newsletter, *Teglachen*, that the struggle for Ethiopian national unity and freedom can only be based on class struggle (*Teglachen*, Miyazya 1960). In December, another student, Awsa Esatu⁹, wrote an article in *Tataq*, the theoretical journal of ESUE, addressing what he called 'The Class and Tribal Contradiction in Ethiopia'. After a survey of recent rebellions in Gedeo, Bale and Harar, among others, he concluded that the so-called ethnic strife was inseparable from class struggle. In a vein of argument reminiscent of Tedla Haile, he argued that it was the failure of the policy of the Amhara ruling class to co-opt members of other ethnic groups that gave those rebellions an ethnic character. Further, these rebellions posed a problem for the nation-wide class struggle in as much as the regime claimed that, in repressing them, it was defending national unity (*Tataq*, Tahsas 1961/December 1968).

Even more intriguing are an editorial and two contributions in successive issues of the University Students Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA) organ *Struggle* in the same month. The editorial, entitled 'Regionalism – A Historical Phenomenon', described regionalism as 'a slight variation of tribalism' and belonged to the last stage of feudalism. The editor's admonitory conclusion: 'The University Students, being conscious, are resolved that such sentiments like regional ethnocentrism and tribalism have no place neither in the campus nor in the country. But the solution requires patience, understanding and struggle with the Ethiopian masses' (*Struggle*, II: 5). In the next issue, Gebru Gebrewold, founding member of the radical core group known as the Crocodiles, wrote a piece entitled 'Tribalism as a Feudal Tactic of Divide and Rule' in which he asserts that the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF)

⁹ Both Jalata Ibsa and Awsa Esatu appear to be pseudonyms.

‘stands for secessionism and that its leadership does not entertain the interests of the oppressed Eritrean masses’ (*Struggle*, III: 1). In the same issue, Abdul Mejid Hussein, a student of Somali origin who had served as vice-president of NUEUS in 1965/66, wrote even more emphatically on ‘Ethiopia and Ethiopianism’, defining the latter as ‘the belief held by the Ethiopian who thinks in terms of the people as a whole. He does not say, my area of the country is more exploited than the rest; my tribal group is not well represented in the political life of the country’ (*ibid.*). He goes on to argue that the government in power is a class government rather than an ethnic (i.e. Amhara) one and objects to the idea of changing the status of Amharic as the official language as it ‘would only add complications’ (*ibid.*).

As university students vented such sobering reflections, ethnic clashes continued to erupt among high school students in particular. In 1969, such clashes occurred at the elite General Wingate Secondary School and the Bahr Dar Polytechnique. The clash at Wingate, which took place in December 1969,¹⁰ was mainly between Oromo and Tigrean students and led to the temporary closure of the school. It is alleged that Tilahun Gizaw was killed on the evening of December 28 after he had visited the school with other colleagues of the USUAA leadership and succeeded in effecting a truce between the conflicting parties (NAL 21.03.3, 297/62/2708). In the same month, another serious ethnic clash erupted between Eritrean and non-Eritrean students at the Bahr Dar Polytechnique. The apparent cause of the clash was a leaflet that was found posted on the walls of the school accusing Eritreans of undermining the country’s economy and security. This led to a boycott of classes by the Eritrean students, who even went further and demanded to be returned to their province. The government report that was compiled following the incident actually accused the Eritrean students of deliberately posting the leaflet to justify their action and pointed to the increasingly isolationist stance that they had assumed in the school life (NAL 297/1/2708/4). What probably added fuel to the general tension were the anti-Arab protests that were being staged throughout the country in 1969 in the wake of the series of ELF attacks on Ethiopian Airlines planes. The Eritreans, who had framed their armed struggle within the pan-Arab movement, were easily seen as collaborators.

The Walealign manifesto

Less than a year after the manifestly pan-Ethiopian *Tataq* and *Struggle* articles cited above were written, on 17 November 1969, Walealign Mekonnen’s piece, ‘On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia’,

¹⁰ The fact that these clashes took place after Walealign Mekonnen’s piece on the question of nationalities appeared in *Struggle* might suggest that they were the effect rather than the cause of that article. But, this is difficult to sustain for two reasons. For one thing, it is very unlikely that the piece would have had such widespread impact so soon. For another, these ethnic clashes in schools had a longer history, the first, as indicated above, going back to 1967.

appeared in *Struggle*. As a matter of fact, Walelign had read the paper earlier at Christmas Hall, a big and rather ungraceful multi-purpose edifice that served as the main cafeteria as well as venue for student assemblies and graduation ceremonies.¹¹ The occasion was an orientation programme that USUAA had arranged for freshmen students. That author actually refers to that occasion and attributes the ‘generalizations and inadequate analysis’ of the piece to the circumstances of its delivery. The paper came like a bolt from the blue and, as a fourth year student at the time, this author distinctly recalls that its reading was followed by intense discussions that went on into the early hours of the following morning. Abdul Mohamed, a student at the time, also recalls these heated overnight debates, adding significantly that at the conclusion of the reading, unusually in such gatherings, there was no applause (Bahru 2010: 101–2). Such were the momentous words contained in the speech that most students came out of the hall dazed rather than edified.

How does one explain such a radical shift in less than a year? In his critique of the student radical tradition, Messay offers the following psycho-analytical explanation:

What drove Walelign to write an article that called for nothing less than the dismantling of Ethiopia’s state and the fracturing of its unity? Even if terms like ‘self-determination’, ‘nations’, and ‘nationalities’ belong also to the Leninist lexicon, we need to go deeper than a mere doctrinal conversion to explain their impact on Amhara students. We must appeal to their psychological effect of soothing guilt by inducing a renunciatory mentality. (Messay 2008: 152–3)

In other words, Walelign was atoning for the sins of his ethnic group, the Amhara. Abdul Mohamed would prefer to trace the speech to Walelign’s time in prison earlier in the year, when he met a number of detainees from the Mecha-Tulama Association, the Bale uprising and the ELF. He also depicts the speech as a ‘summation’ of the fervent, if ‘clandestine’, discussions that were going on among students in the preceding months, including the *Struggle* articles cited above (Bahru 2010: 99). At the same forum where Abdul made these suggestions, Hailu Ayele, the first secretary-general of USUAA, also reported on one such discussion that took place in the summer of 1969, soon after the release of Berhane Meskel from prison, in which no less than fifty people were present. The main item on the agenda was the role of the student movement, more particularly the fact that it appeared to have reached the end of the road. Yohannes Sebhato, who later joined the EPLF, only to be killed along with other members of the dissident group known as the *Menka’e* (‘Bats’), proposed that the way forward was for Ethiopia’s nationalities to organize themselves to fight national

¹¹ It apparently got its name from the fact it was where the emperor used to give Christmas gifts to pupils before 1961, when he left the Ganata Le’ul Palace, as the main campus of Haile Sellassie I University was known, for the Jubilee Palace following the 1960 coup.

oppression and later coalesce to form a united Ethiopia. This line later came to be known as 'the coalition theory' (OR: 177).¹² It is also worth noting that it was some weeks later that Berhane Meskel and his group hijacked a plane to Khartoum, to be followed some eighteen months later by Yohannes Sebhatu and his group. Discussions of the above nature are something that Walelign also refers to in his article.

In short, Walelign's prison experience and the fervent discussions on the national question that took place in the summer of 1969, much more than the psycho-historical hypothesis put forward by Messay, appears to explain the Walelign manifesto. At this stage, Walelign had hardly read the Marxist-Leninist classics on the national question and it shows. Although not documented, allegations have also been floating that Walelign was only acting as a mouthpiece of organized groups like the ELF, who were exploiting for their own ends the fame for intrepidity that Walelign had already attained during the confrontations with the regime in the months leading up to his detention.¹³ This might well have arisen from the role that students like Yohannes Sebhatu exercised in the discussions of the summer of 1969. But, given the strength of his character, it would be difficult to imagine that Walelign would have been manipulated so easily by organizations like ELF. If he was a mouthpiece, he was probably one for the group of students (the 'small minority' as he calls them in his article) who were discussing the question. He was thus giving expression to the consensus reached by that group. But, from the style and language of the text, one can conclude that the piece appears to have been written in his own words.

What are some of the main points of the article that could be said to have initiated an idea that took a trajectory of momentous significance for Ethiopia. The central argument was that Ethiopia was not one nation but a collection of 'a dozen nationalities with their own languages, ways of dressing, history, social organization and territorial entity'. In a conceptual leap that would have been inexcusable in the more refined debates that were to emerge subsequently, he then goes on to describe these nationalities as nations – 'the Oromo Nation, the Tigray Nation, the Amhara Nation, the Gurage Nation . . . and however much you may not like it the Somali Nation'. By the same logic, one does not talk of the 'Ethiopian people' (in the singular) but of 'Ethiopian peoples', not of tribalism but of nationalism. He dubs the nationalism propagated by the ruling class as 'fake Ethiopian nationalism' because it is a 'mask' (note the Fanonian lexicon) for Amhara or at most Amhara-

¹² Interestingly enough, that particular meeting is reported to have broken up following angry exchanges between Berhane Meskel and Gebru Gebrewold. It is conceivable that the latter, who had already expressed his opposition to 'tribalism' in the strongest possible terms, was unhappy at the turn things were taking.

¹³ Shumet Sishagne (1992: 303n) records the testimony of a former ELF fighter, Tesfa Mikael Giorgio, who says that he went to Addis Ababa in January 1970 and organized Eritrean university students 'in cells and urged them to exploit the university students' movement for the benefit of Eritrean secessionism'. But this seems to have happened some two months after Walelign's speech in 1969 and could not thus be adduced as a contributory factor to the Walelign manifesto.

Tigre hegemony. All other groups have to wear this mask to be accepted as 'genuine Ethiopians', often going to the extent of changing their names to conform to the dominant norm (*Struggle*, V: 1).

In the second part of his article, Walelign tries to offer a solution to the problem, recommending the building of 'a genuine national state . . . a state in which all nationalities participate equally in state affairs . . . a state where every nationality is given equal opportunity to preserve and develop its language, its music and its history'. How that state was going to be constructed comes out towards the end of the analysis, where Walelign indicates that 'a genuine egalitarian national state' can only be achieved 'through violence, through revolutionary armed struggle'. Military coups are ruled out, whether they be of the Mengistu Neway (Amhara) or Taddese Berru (Oromo) vintage, although, Walelign qualifies, the latter at least had the merit of giving the Oromo some sense of self-respect.

Nor did Walelign have much faith in the ELF or the Bale uprising, the first 'bourgeois' and the second 'feudalist'. While they were correct to point out the existence of 'national oppression', as they were then constituted, they offered little hope for a lasting solution because: 'They do not try to expand their struggles to the other nationalities. They do not attempt to make a broad-based assault on the foundations of the existing regime . . . they are not Socialists. And if they are not Socialists, it would only be a change of masters for the masses'. Walelign is at pains to point out that he does not oppose these movements because they are secessionist per se. 'As long as secession is led by the peasants and workers and believes in its internationalist obligation, it is not only to be supported but also militarily assisted . . . It is the duty of every revolutionary to question whether a movement is Socialist or reactionary not whether a movement is secessionist or not' (*ibid.*).

Even if the exposition might not have been particularly elegant, the issues raised in Walelign's article were to dominate the debates around what came to be known as the national question. The first assertion that Walelign makes is the existence of national oppression or the cultural and political hegemony of the Amhara-Tigrean elite. Ceasing to call the oppressed groups 'tribes' and their ideology 'tribalism' was meant to be the first step towards recognition of their equal status. But, oblivious of the importance that the nuance between the concepts of 'nationality' and 'nation' was to assume in later debates, Walelign used them almost interchangeably. It is also clear that Walelign's knowledge of the Marxist classics on the question was still at its rudimentary stage, for nowhere does he evoke the concept of 'self-determination up to and including secession'. He does, however, emphatically lift the taboo on secession, condoning it as long as it is led by a progressive organization. What is also intriguing is his ruling out of any peaceful resolution of the problem, putting forward unequivocally the violent option – indication perhaps of the growing ascendancy of the cult of violence.

Walelign's article was written in English. In what appears to have 201

been a concerted move, the same issue of *Struggle* carried an article in Amharic elaborating one of the ideas thrown by Walelign. This article, entitled 'People or Peoples in Ethiopia', was written by Abraham Gebre Egziabher, a third year history student. One striking feature of the article was the number of Amharic words that the author coined for concepts like socialism, mode of production, ideology, objective conditions, opportunists, progressive forces, and inhumane. But undoubtedly the most conspicuous feature of the article was its unequivocal negation of the idea of one Ethiopian people, curiously intertwined, as in the case of Walelign, with a call to arms:

በሙሉ ልብ (ሳልፈራ ሳልቸር) ሕብረተ ሰታፌ አይሉ በመገኘቱ ለትግላችን መልክ ሆነ፡፡ ቅን፡ ዘላቂና የሚያስተማምኑ አግዓዚያን የሚፈጠሩት ከዚህ ወዲያ ነው፡፡ ዱርም መግቢያው ሰዓት ደረሰ፡፡ ጥያቄው ይመለስ፡፡ ያበጠው ይፈንዳ፡፡ «የኢትዮጵያ ሕዝብ» ብሎ ነገር ደግሞ፡፡ «የኢትዮጵያ ሕዝብ» የሚባል ነገር የለም፡፡ (*ibid.*)

Let me state in all confidence (without fear or trepidation): socialism has prevailed and our struggle is on course. It is henceforth that genuine and reliable liberators will be created. The time to go to the bush is nigh. Come what may, let the question be answered: 'Ethiopian people'? There is no such thing as 'Ethiopian people'.¹⁴

One could not imagine a more strident language to provoke the powers that be. The consequence of the extremely subversive views featured in the particular *Struggle* issue was to unleash the government press campaign that culminated in the assassination of Tilahun Gizaw and the ensuing crisis. That story has already been told in the preceding chapter.

ESUNA vs. Tilahun Takele

While Walelign and his colleagues were adumbrating their solution to the national question that finally saw the light of day in late 1969, the Ethiopian Students Union in North America (ESUNA) was addressing the same problem, albeit from a different perspective. The 17th Congress of the organization, held in Philadelphia in August 1969, addressed what it characterized as the problem of regionalism in Ethiopia. According to Alem Habtu, an ESUNA leader, the Congress was designed to be a more elaborate follow-up on the resolutions at the ESUE Congress in Zagreb in 1968. That Congress had resolved, in line with the preceding Congresses at Vienna, Kent and Montargue, for the disestablishment of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the equal treatment of all religions, the 'elimination' of ethnic and linguistic differences, and the development of a simple common language for all while at the same time fostering the different ethnic languages. The Congress also castigated the ELF leadership for its lack of class analysis and for denying

¹⁴ Occasionally, Abraham's inventiveness in coining Amharic words tended to go rather awry. For example, the Amharic word that he used for 'peoples' (*ahzab*) actually has the connotation of 'pagan'. *Hezboch* would have been a less equivocal plural form of *hezb* ('people').

that Eritrea was ever part of Ethiopia. While recognizing the legitimacy of the struggle of the Eritrean people, it was opposed to ELF's confused propaganda campaign, including its naïve belief that the UN could resolve the problem (IES CL: 2395/01/3.1). It was also felt that ESUNA was better placed than students inside Ethiopia to avoid the government retribution that the raising of such a sensitive issue would entail (Bahru 2008: 66). Little did they suspect that the home-based students were coming up with a much more radical proposition. The papers presented to guide the discussions at the Philadelphia Congress and the resolutions that the executive committee was finally mandated to draft all appeared in the February 1970 issue of *Challenge* (X: 1).

These papers, which were eventually published in *Challenge*, were by leading figures of ESUNA: Andreas Eshete, Hagos G. Yesus, Melesse Ayalew and Alem Habtu. The editorial introducing the collection modestly explained the aim as being 'to generate open and reasoned discussion of the problem; and to articulate the position of the student movement on this question'. It emphasized the point that the papers did not claim to provide a 'definitive answer' to the question; rather, the position adopted was liable to 'be more and more refined as conditions change in the course of the struggle'. Andreas put forward 'some theoretical considerations' to the general issue of regionalism and religion. Self-determination, he argued, makes sense only in the context of a bourgeois-democratic revolution, which was hardly the case in Ethiopia or Eritrea, where an armed struggle was being waged. However, the principle has some legitimacy in as much as it underscores the importance of fighting 'for the equality of the regions and religions of Ethiopia'. He concludes that:

the differential between significant features of the primary development which require support in Ethiopia and the secondary phenomena which are reactionary in the Ethiopian context highlights the important distinction between the recognition of the right to self-determination and the exercise of the right. All progressive Ethiopians must recognize and fight for the recognition of the right to self-determination of all Ethiopian regions and religions. They cannot, however, lend support to the exercise of the right to self-determination where doing so is subject to the objections raised in the application of the general development to Ethiopia. Especially, where the demand for self-determination is not part of the opposition to feudalism and imperialism, it cannot command progressive support because the exercise of the right would be self-contradictory. (*ibid.*)

It is interesting that, at a workshop held in the summer of 1969 in the Italian city of Tyrol, Andreas came up with a similar solution to the problem of ethnic and religious domination. The meeting, called by the social psychologist Leonard Doob of Yale University, brought together intellectuals and government officials from Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia to discuss Somalia's claims over the Somali-inhabited territories of the two other countries (the Ogaden in Ethiopia and

the then Northern Frontier District in Kenya). In an appraisal of the workshop that he subsequently wrote, Andreas expressed his disappointment at what he called 'the pervasive lack of principles' in the deliberations, with most of the participants from Ethiopia and Kenya seeing the problem in purely territorial terms, thereby promoting the official positions of their respective governments, rather than from the perspective of the Somali inhabitants concerned. The solution to the problem of ethnic, religious and regional domination, he argued, was what he termed 'a recognition of the minimum content of the principle of self-determination'. But the struggle against such domination can only be seen within the context of the broader struggle against social and political oppression in the country as a whole (Andreas 1970).¹⁵

Another contributor, Hagos G. Yesus, addressed the 'Problem of Regionalism in Ethiopia'. He argued that regionalism was as old as Ethiopian history, going back to Aksumite times. The Ethiopian political system has always had a federal character, as can be seen from the imperial title of *negusa nagast* ('king of kings'). In an apparent allusion to the problems in Eritrea and Bale, the author stated that what gave the problem of regionalism 'compelling urgency' at the time was its occurrence at that particular juncture in Ethiopian history. The solution to that problem will thus have to avoid both 'big chauvinism and narrow minded provincialism'. As regionalism is but a symptom of feudalism, its solution is to be found in embracing socialism, which stands opposed to both feudalism and imperialism. Hagos also does not rule out the principle of self-determination, but he adds an important qualification: 'When the progressive Ethiopian proclaims self-determination for the oppressed *nationalities*, he does so with the full awareness that self-determination, like everything else, is a sham and a delusion when devoid of socialist content' (*Challenge*, X: 1, emphasis added).

The third article, on the 'problem of religion', was written by Melesse Ayalew. It opens by asserting that 'cultural, religious and linguistic self-determination is a fundamental right of any historically constituted group of people'. One would have expected the article to proceed from this to address the relegation of Islam to secondary status in the Ethiopian polity. But the article effectively denies there was any such problem, claiming not only that there were more Muslims than Christians by the 12th century but also that 'inasmuch as there was no Ethiopian state as we know it today, there had not and could not have been a Christian Ethiopia'. The fact that there was an exploiting minority in both religions made it imperative that 'cultural or religious self-determination' should not be seen outside the context of class relationship.

The final article by the editor, Alem Habtu, made some general obser-

¹⁵ Cf. his recollections in Bahru 2010: 103. He thought that the said workshop was held 'long before the national question became an issue in North America'. In actual fact, it was held at about the same time as the Philadelphia congress that tackled the national (i.e. 'regional') question.

vations on regionalism and national liberation, thereby addressing the specific issue of the Eritrean question. Two important observations that he makes at the outset are that regionalism was inherent in feudalism and that it has been used as a 'counter-revolutionary weapon in the hands of the ruling class'. The objection to the ELF leadership arose not out of concern for 'imperial sovereignty' but rather from its reformist (as opposed to revolutionary) programme and its attempt to see the Eritrean problem outside the Ethiopian context. This does not mean, however, that support should not be given to popular struggles such as the Eritrean one so long as they are against 'the feudal system and imperialism'. The 'political line of its leadership are secondary aspects which in no way negate the objective character of the struggle'. Interestingly enough, he also adduces an argument that was to be quite common in subsequent debates on the national question: just as supporting the right of divorce does not necessarily result in the destruction of the family, support of popular uprisings need not encourage secession. Also, contrary to Melesse's assertions, Alem points out the close relationship between church and state, going to the extent of calling the Ethiopian empire-state 'a theocratic (Orthodox Christian) state in a multi-religious community' (*ibid.*).

The resolutions of the Congress almost inexorably followed from the papers. All the more so as, because of shortage of time, the ESUNA executive committee had been mandated to draft them in the spirit of the Congress deliberations. However, the rather nuanced analysis of regionalism in the studies, particularly those of Andreas and Alem, was not evident in the resolutions, which opened with an outright condemnation of regionalism 'as an inseparable part of our opposition to feudalism and imperialism'. In view of the fact that the 'regional and religious domination of the Ethiopian people is secondary to their primary domination by the feudal ruling class and the forces of imperialism', the Congress expressed its opposition to 'all separatist movements since their objective is contrary to the Ethiopian people's emancipation from feudalism'. While this, therefore, meant opposition to the reactionary ELF leadership, it did not stop ESUNA from supporting fully 'the armed struggle of the Eritrean people' and condemning 'the brutal acts of the Haile selassie regime'. As far as other regions of Ethiopia were concerned, ESUNA called for the 'recognition and promotion of all Ethiopian cultures, languages and religions' as 'a prerequisite to the building of a secular, unified, and liberated Ethiopia' (*ibid.*).

There seems no doubt that the ESUNA resolutions and the Walelign manifesto, which came up with diametrically opposite conclusions, evolved in complete independence of one another. What is even more certain is that the pamphlet entitled 'The National Question ("Regionalism") in Ethiopia', which appeared in 1970, was a direct response to the stand taken by ESUNA at its 17th Congress. It was written by Tilahun Takele (hereafter TT), a pseudonym adopted in memory of the

two opponents of the Haile Sellassie regime who died within a month of each other in late 1969 – Tilahun Gizaw, the student leader, and Takkele Welde Hawaryat, the patriot turned implacable opponent. It has been attributed to the ‘Algerian group’, the group of students who hijacked an Ethiopian Airlines plane to the Sudan in August 1969 and eventually ended up in Algiers.

TT’s tract set the standard in student discourse in more ways than one. To begin with, its highly polemical style – which formed a perfect contrast to the modesty, not to say prevarication, of the ESUNA leadership – was to set a pattern that was imitated by both adherents and opponents of its political line and to contribute to the exacerbation of ideological and political differences in the student movement. As I have written elsewhere, the ‘verbal violence’ that it initiated was to translate itself into the physical violence that killed a generation. TT’s intention was not ‘to enlighten the ESUNA leaders; he was out to destroy them, to deny them any quarter in the ranks of the student movement. He exhausts the repertoire of abusive epithets bequeathed by Lenin and Stalin in his efforts to annihilate ideologically the ESUNA leadership, which had dared to propose a different solution to a common problem’ (Bahru 2008: 245; cf. Kiflu 1993: 77).

More importantly, its central thesis of ‘self-determination up to and including secession’ was to assume almost canonical significance. The first major point of difference was terminological. ESUNA had eschewed the term ‘tribe’ and ‘tribalism’ – so common on the home front as late as 1968 – in favour of ‘region’ and ‘regionalism’, although the word ‘nationality’ appears somewhat inadvertently at one point in Hagos’s paper. By contrast, TT chose the Marxist-Leninist nomenclature of ‘nation’ and ‘nationality’, although the distinction between the two related concepts was to prove rather tricky. The choice term of ESUNA, ‘region’, he dubbed ‘a “philistine” compromise between “nation” and “tribe”’ (Tilahun 1970: 6–8).¹⁶ On a more substantive level, TT disputed the dismissal of the national question or regionalism to secondary status. The reason given was that ‘such secondary contradictions in the realm of the superstructure can be decisive in limited historical moments, for example, in the period of the initial formation of a revolutionary vanguard acceptable to the masses of all nationalities’. Hence the need to understand and even support the progressive content of national movements, be they separatist or otherwise. Failing which, such movements would degenerate into local nationalisms, making well-nigh impossible ‘the formation of a multi-national revolutionary organization as well as . . . the multi-national democratic republic we hope will be established in place of the present empire-state’ (*ibid.*: 1–3).

TT then proceeds to a lengthy Marxist-Leninist analysis of the

¹⁶ Two versions of the essay have been identified: the first what seems to be the original version (with title page and table of contents) at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies library in Addis Ababa, and the second a reprint in *Newsletter* (1, 3, March 1971) published by the New York Chapter of ESUNA. The page references here are to the IES version.

concept of 'nation' and the right to self-determination of nations. He begins with a definition of the concept of nation 'in the Ethiopian context', concurring with the ESUNA leadership in accepting classic definition of a nation 'as a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture' (*ibid.*: 5). By this reckoning, Ethiopia will always remain 'a multi-national state', even after doing away with the oppressive system, not the 'nation' that the ESUNA guru, Hagos Gebreyesus, wished it to be. TT goes further to argue that, in the epoch of 'rising capitalism' that Ethiopia is passing through, there are no longer the 'tribes' that bourgeois social science tries to inculcate in students but 'full-fledged nations' (*ibid.*: 5-6).

Turning to the question of the specific historical circumstances that give rise to 'national movements', TT argues that just as nations emerge in the era of rising capitalism, national movements belong to 'the period of the final victory of capitalism over feudalism' (*ibid.*: 9). He then goes on to define the meaning of 'the right of nations to self-determination', asserting that it means '*nothing less* than the right of "political self-determination, i.e. the right to secede and form a separate state"' (*ibid.*: 11; original emphasis). Supporting the general principle of the right to secession does not mean, however, automatic support for all secessions. In other words, every case of the demand for secession must be judged on its particular merit. On the other hand, in deciding on cases of demands for the secession, the right of the people concerned and its ultimate value to the struggle, rather than the territorial integrity of the state, should be the primary concern.

What, one may ask, is the relevance of all this to the Ethiopian situation? To begin with, TT asserts that Ethiopia is 'a multi-national empire-state', describing the Amhara, Gurage, Oromo, Tigreans, etc., as 'developed nations or fast developing nationalities'. Second, countries like Ethiopia which are multi-national and 'at the first stage of capitalism . . . can be saved from national strife only if they recognized the right of "self-determination" of the nations and nationalities within them'. National movements need not automatically result in secession. But 'the outright condemnation of such movements or their *demands* and the rejection of their RIGHT to self-determination including secession is neither democratic, nor will it solve the problem' (*ibid.*: 26; emphasis original). Third, these nations/nationalities have the right to self-determination, up to and including secession. Recognition of such a right is essential for a multi-national organization that has the agenda of overcoming feudalism and imperialism. The model to be followed was that of the Soviet Union experience, where, following the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks recognized the right of each and every nation of the former Russian Empire to self-determination up to and including secession. While some nations opted to exercise that right and became independent, others chose to remain within the new Soviet federation.

In the final section of his tract, TT prescribes the correct stand that individual revolutionaries and revolutionary organizations should take with regard to the principle of self-determination. Individual revolutionaries, he urges, should support the right of self-determination while retaining their right to criticize the programme of a specific national liberation movement or the advisability or otherwise of secession in a particular case. While a 'Social-Democrat' of an oppressor nation should be prepared to accept secession, that of an oppressed nation should agitate for voluntary integration. Likewise, a revolutionary organization should incorporate the principle of self-determination in its programme, condemn the use of force against a nation fighting to secede and call for 'the settlement of the question of such secession only on the basis of a universal, direct and equal vote of the population of the given territory by secret ballot' (*ibid.*, 27–28).

With regard to the specific case of Eritrea, while recognizing the multi-national character of Eritrea itself and hence the right of each nationality within Eritrea for self-determination, TT nonetheless saw no objection to the different nationalities forming a common front to fight for an independent multi-national state. Although aware of the deficiencies of ELF, the organization leading the struggle for such independence, he refrained from giving 'any *definite* opinion' (original emphasis) as to the advisability or otherwise of secession at that particular stage. Thus, while supporting the ELF in its struggle to realize the right of the Eritrean peoples, TT believes that the ELF leadership should be criticized for its ambiguous stand vis-à-vis US imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism (*ibid.*: 29–31). In conclusion, TT reiterated that supporting the right to self-determination was 'motivated by nothing else but the desire to foster mutual trust, confidence and genuine fraternity among the various peoples of Ethiopia'. In one of the most potent, if controversial, passages of the tract, TT concluded that 'We believe that the recognition and support of the right of secession by revolutionary Ethiopians, especially those from the dominant nations, will foster trust and fraternity among the various nationalities. We believe that the support of the right to secession will, by itself, *discourage* secession' (*ibid.*: 32; original emphasis).

The most striking feature of TT's tract – and its fundamental weakness – was the paucity of empirical data to support such a strongly worded argument. The emphasis has been more on ideological rectitude, i.e. strict adherence to the canons of Marxism-Leninism on the national question, than on an understanding of Ethiopian history or ethnography. Indeed, although the tract is richly documented with some sixty footnotes, there is only one reference to an academic work on Ethiopia and that not of the highest order (Greenfield 1969). The remaining references are either to the ESUNA authors who were under attack or the Marxist works on the national question,

primarily those of Lenin and Stalin, in particular the former's *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination* (Moscow 1960) and the latter's *Marxism and the National Question* (Vienna 1913). The result of this paucity of empirical research is that, in the enumeration of Ethiopian nationalities/nations, 'the Arusi, Bale, Kotu' are enumerated as independent categories rather than as branches of the Oromo. There is also recourse to the highly ambiguous, not to say pejorative, term, 'Shankilla', which in reality does not refer to any one clearly defined group in particular but refers to the distinctly dark-skinned people found in the western periphery of the country. But the central thesis of the tract, the right of nations/nationalities to self-determination, *up to and including secession*, is asserted emphatically. That fateful rider was to be as important as, if not more important than, the fundamental principle. The regional autonomy that had been advocated by ESUNA was rejected not so much on the basis of its practical applicability or otherwise in the Ethiopian case but because it was a solution prescribed only by the 'petty-bourgeois Social Democrats of Western Europe and by the bourgeois-liberal monarchists (Cadets) of Czarist Russia' (*ibid.*: 25).

The ESUNA rebuttal came in July 1971 in the form of an article entitled 'Nationalities and Class Struggle in Ethiopia' by Tumtu Lencho (hereafter TL), a pen-name adopted by Andreas Eshete.¹⁷ It dominated the entire issue of *Challenge* XI, 2, except for a short piece entitled 'Mass Struggle Versus Focoism' by Rejjim Guzo (another pen-name which means 'Long Journey') – a 'commentary' on the focoism that, according to the editor, has come to dominate a section of the student movement and is not entirely unrelated to the debate on the national question. The editor dismisses TT's intervention by denying the appearance of 'a single *substantive* contribution from any circle extending or surpassing the preliminary studies' presented in *Challenge*, X, 1, and asserts emphatically that 'the *national question is and can only be subordinate to the class question*' (original emphasis). TL however introduces his long essay by referring to TT as 'a rag [that] purported to discuss the problem', before he launches an attack on 'bourgeois nationalism' (which he elaborates as 'the chauvinism of oppressor nationalities and the narrow nationalism of oppressed nationalities'), which he hoped had been laid to rest by the resolutions of the 8th ESUE Congress at Zagreb (1968) and those of the 17th ESUNA Congress in Philadelphia (1969). The article was thus intended to state more explicitly the 'basis in revolutionary theory and practice' of the correct positions that were adopted in those two Congresses.

The first part of the essay is devoted to a theoretical discussion of the national question. It bases its understanding of the concept of a

¹⁷ This was revealed by that author at the September 2005 retreat that this author had organized, although he also dissociated himself from the polemics that had been injected into it by the editor of *Challenge* in his absence (he had in the meantime joined Haile Sellassie I University as a philosophy lecturer): cf. Bahru 2010: 105.

nation on Stalin's classic definition of it as 'a historically evolved, stable community of language, and territory, economic life and psychological makeup in a community of culture' (*Challenge* XI, 2: 8). Moreover, it is a form of social organization that pertains to 'the epoch of rising capitalism'. Thus, both the progressive potential of national movements in as far as they constitute an important element of the bourgeois-democratic revolution and their 'retrogressive binds' on the proletarian revolution have to be clearly appreciated. This is followed by a fairly lengthy discussion of the principle of self-determination. Drawing on the works of Lenin, Stalin and Mao, the author underscores the limits within which the principle has to be exercised. The final conclusion is unambiguous:

It is clear that the *national demands of the liberation movements are justified only in so far as they do not obstruct the anti-feudalist and the anti-imperialist minimum program and the maximum program of socialism that are on the revolutionary agenda of the backward countries in the new era*. Accordingly, the application of the principle of self-determination is legitimate only in so far as it does not interfere with the organizational and practical unity of the progressive classes of all nationalities and the leadership of the laboring masses, both of which are essential for the victory of the minimum and maximum program of the liberation struggle. (*ibid.*, 29; original emphasis)

After setting this theoretical context, TL then turns to a discussion of the situation in Ethiopia, which he describes as 'A Mosaic of Nationalities'. Even if he relies rather excessively on Margery Perham (1969), then a standard work of reference, the treatment of the subject is based on relatively better documentation than was the case with TT, whose description of the 'nations' of Ethiopia TL characterizes as 'an embarrassment of riches'. In view of the predominance of pre-capitalist relations in Ethiopia, TL preferred to describe what TT has dubbed 'nations' as 'nationalities or national groups . . . in a historical process of forming a common territory, a common language, a common culture, but . . . without a common economic life'. Hence 'the suitability of the regional formulation of the question of nationalities in Ethiopia' (*ibid.*: 40–41). His solution to the problem of nationalities in Ethiopia lies in the recognition of the principle of self-determination, which would have four important elements: 'full support for the rights of nationalities; . . . unconditional struggle for full equality among all nationalities; . . . complete protection of all the rights of minority peoples', and regional autonomy. But, given the threat of imperialism, the application of the principle of self-determination has to be subordinated to the demands of the class struggle. The emphasis has to be on regional autonomy rather than on what he calls TT's '*idée fixe*' of secession.

TL's article is a much more richly documented and hence much more refined essay than any of the others that had appeared in the 1970 issue of *Challenge*, which TL curiously commends in the highest

terms. In fact, Hagos's was written without any reference to either the Marxist classics or works on Ethiopia, and Melesse's depiction of the religious scene was 'an embarrassment of riches', to borrow a phrase from TL himself. With TL's intervention, ESUNA also appears to have made a significant shift in terminology from 'region' to 'nationality', from 'regionalism' to 'national movement'. Although TL chides TT for his infatuation with 'argument by appeal to authority', he relies as much on the authority of the standard Marxist-Leninist works on the national question. But, as indicated earlier, where he clearly has the edge on TT is in his consultation of the available literature on Ethiopia in his analysis of the concrete Ethiopian situation. Thus TL appears to be on surer ground with regard to Ethiopia than TT. But, as Andreas reflected retrospectively (Bahru 2010: 104–5), ESUNA's approach to the national question was much more cautious than either Waleign's or TT's – cautiousness dictated by fear that it would create irreparable divisions in the ranks of the student movement. Hence the fundamental divergence between the two positions on what I have called the fateful rider of 'up to and including secession', and this was to become the battleground in the two successive annual Congresses held in Europe and North America in the summer of 1971.

The ESUE and ESUNA Congresses of 1971

The first round of the battle was fought in August 1971 in Berlin, at the 11th Congress of ESUE. Unfortunately, we do not have the minutes of that Congress to reconstruct a full picture of the historic debates. What we do know is that the meeting was preceded by intense study of the national question in the various chapters – so much so that students in the Lund chapter were asserting jocularly that they had become 'redolent of nations' (Bahru 2010: 108). Although it was meant to be an ESUE Congress, in effect it turned out to be a congress of the World Wide Union of Ethiopian Students. Delegates to the Congress came not only from the various ESUE chapters but also from North America and Algeria. Moreover they came armed with the two rival theses of Tilahun Takele and Tumtu Lencho (a.k.a. Behane Meskel and Andreas Eshete) both of them written outside Europe. The report of the ESUE Executive Committee, presented by the president Negede Gobeze, set the tone of the proceedings. While he emphasized the primary importance of ridding the country of feudalism and imperialism and establishing a democratic order free from oppression and exploitation, he nonetheless asserted, in effect pre-empting the final resolution of the Congress, ESUE's recognition of both the right of nations to self-determination up to and including secession and the need for the unity of all oppressed nations in Ethiopia in waging the anti-feudal and anti-imperialist struggle (*Teglachen, Maskaram* 1964/September 1971).



10. Venue of 11th ESUE Congress

(Photo © Bahru Zewde)

As the debate unfolded, it must have been obvious to most delegates who the real persons were behind those two pseudonyms. Most accounts recall one of the most sustained debates in the history of the Ethiopian student movement. According to some, although the delegates were divided into various commissions to conduct the debate, the general interest converged on the commission where the two protagonists had been allocated. Or, as Andreas recollected, the debate was between North America and Algeria, with the ESUE leadership having essentially an observer role (Bahru 2010: 105).¹⁸

The final result, as reflected in the resolutions adopted by the General Assembly, was a victory for the TT thesis, including the assertion that the transition from feudalism to capitalism had been accompanied by the rise of nations in Ethiopia. Interestingly enough, in the introductory section of the resolutions, the Amharic term *beher*, which is now the standard Amharic equivalent for ‘nation’, is translated as ‘nationality’; the current Amharic equivalent of ‘nationality’ is *beheresab* rather than *beher*. The section postulates that Ethiopia was forged by force of arms by Emperor Menilek and the various nationalities in it have been kept together by ‘force and reactionary violence’. Because the conquest was accompanied by extensive land alienation, the national question and the land question were inextricably linked. It underscored the need for progressives of all nationalities to free themselves from both chauvinism and narrow nationalism in order to forge the multi-national revolutionary front. It asserted emphatically that, as Ethiopia was

¹⁸ Yeraswork took strong exception to this version, recalling the year-long debate on the question that was held in the various ESUE chapters, and the general reticence of ESUE leaders like Haile Fida in such meetings. OR: 174–5.

passing from feudalism to capitalism, not only were a number of nationalities emerging in Ethiopia but there were also national movements in Eritrea, Bale, Sidamo and the Ogaden.

In view of these developments, the ESUE Congress resolved to recognize the right of the various nationalities of Ethiopia to self-determination and to struggle for and to support all movements that fight for the recognition of that right. The exercise of that right could be in the form of regional autonomy, a federation or the formation of a separate state. However, the Congress urged all oppressed nationalities and working peoples to deliberate solemnly on the pros and cons of secession before resorting to that measure. The resolutions were accompanied by a special declaration on the struggle of 'the Eritrean peoples'. It began not only with a condemnation of the abrogation of the Federation but of its establishment in the first place, characterizing it as a plot jointly concocted by US imperialism and the Ethiopian feudal regime. After condemning in the strongest possible terms the repressive measures taken by the regime against Eritreans in the wake of the armed struggle that had started in 1961, the Congress recognized the right of the peoples of Eritrea to self-determination up to and including forming their own independent state. At the same time, it expressed its hope that the anti-feudal and anti-imperialist forces within the national liberation struggle will get the upper hand (*Teglachen, Maskaram* 1964/September 1971).¹⁹

The ESUE position on the national question was articulated in a special issue of its theoretical journal, *Tataq* (*Maskaram–Yakatit* 1965/September–February 1972/73). The article, written by Negat Amde (a pseudonym), begins by hailing the resolutions of the 11th Congress while underlining the need for its in-depth study by the different chapters. It described the ESUNA members who walked out in protest at the resolutions of the 19th ESUNA Congress²⁰ as indistinguishable from the ruling class. After equating what is generally perceived as 'Ethiopian nationalism' as a camouflage for 'Amhara nationalism', it decried the identification by the former leaders of ESUNA of the national movements that were rising in different parts of the country with regionalism. These movements, the article argued, were a natural response to manifold oppression. It went even further and challenged the primacy of class struggle:

የተራማጆች ተግባር («ዋናው የመደበኛ ትግል ነው») እያሉ አዋጅ ማስነገር አይደለም፡
: . . . የተራማጆች ተግባር አስቀድሞ ይህ ከመጠን በላይ ተጋኖ የህዝቡን መንፈስ
አውተብትቦ የያዘውና ምንም አይነት የመደበኛ ትግልም ሆኖ የትግል ትብብር
የሚከለክለውን አለመግባባት ለማስወገድ መታገል ነው፡፡ በበኩላችን የዛሬው ዋና
ተግባር ይህ ነው እንላለን፡፡ (*ibid.*: 21)

¹⁹ Curiously enough, the resolution was entitled 'Beherawi Guday Ba'ityopya', which is rather ambiguous as it can have the meaning of 'National Affair/Issue in Ethiopia'. A less ambiguous rendering would have been 'YaBeheroch Teyaqe Ba'ityopya' or 'YaBeheroch Guday Ba'ityopya'. The latter rendering is actually used in an extended theoretical discussion of the question in *Tataq, Maskaram–Yakatit* 1965/September–February 1972/3).

²⁰ See below: 215.

The task of progressives is not to hail the primacy of class struggle. It is rather to struggle to get rid of the misunderstanding that has shackled the spirit of the people and rendered any class struggle or solidarity impossible. We believe this is the primary task [of progressives] today.

On the Eritrean question, progressives should not only support but also agitate for the Eritrean struggle for self-determination, up to and including secession. Only after fulfilling that obligation could they struggle for unity.

About a month after the ESUE congress, on 24–27 August to be precise, the national question was ‘debated’ at the 19th Congress of ESUNA held in Los Angeles and similar resolutions were adopted. Chaired by the former student leader and economist Eshetu Chole, who was doing his PhD at Syracuse University at the time, it was preceded by some acrimonious exchanges between the president, Sennay Lekke, and a group of members who, as it transpired, were to be proponents of the TT thesis. The controversy revolved around the president’s unilateral authorization of two publications entitled ‘Some Problems of Organization and Education in ESUNA’ and ‘ESUNA Bimonthly’. It also transpired during the debates that many members of the incumbent executive committee were not attending the meeting. The president opened his annual report by lamenting the fact that ‘undue time was given to discuss the National Question in almost all chapters and that discussion on basic revolutionary science was forgotten’. The secretary-general, who was attending, revealed in his own report the tension that had prevailed in the executive committee, accusing the president in particular of total disregard of the principle of collective decision-making, intolerance to differing views and suggestions, and abuse of power (Minutes of the 19th Congress of ESANA: 3–10).

These exchanges more or less set the tone of the proceedings. The main item on the agenda, the ‘National Question’ was discussed in six individual ‘workshops’ and the General Assembly. The points of contention included: whether nations can exist in a pre-capitalist setting or not and why the national question had assumed such central importance in the Ethiopian student movement at that particular time. The ESUNA leadership and its supporters rallied behind the 1970 issue of *Challenge* and the resolutions of the 17th Congress. The opposing group brandished the Tilahun Takele thesis, which had in the meantime been published in a newsletter of the New York Chapter, a veritable stronghold of the opposition. Curiously enough, there was hardly any reference to the more elaborate exposition of the ESUNA position in Tumtu Lencho’s article of July 1971. The debate centred on the concept of ‘region’ that had been central to the 1969 resolutions and the papers that formed its scientific basis – a term that the ESUNA leadership was not very much prepared to defend anymore – and whether there were nationalities or nations in Ethiopia. To the latter question, Mesfin Habtu, a leading member of the TT group, gave the standard answer,

saying that there were 'nationalities fast developing into nations' but more research had to be done to determine which nationalities had already matured into nations. In addition, the TT group pointed out the damage that the 1969 ESUNA stand had done in alienating Eritrean members of the student movement and pushing them to form a separate organization, Eritreans for Liberation in North America (EFLNA) (Congress Minutes, 11–39).

Finally, the matter had to be put to the vote, the TT group tabling the resolutions adopted at the 11th ESUE Congress in Berlin. But before that could be done, the ESUNA leadership raised the issue of bona fide membership in order to qualify to vote. The chairman came up with a compromise formula of all members with outstanding membership fees paying their arrears and then being qualified to vote. The proposal was accepted by Mesfin on behalf of the TT group and rejected by Sennay for the opposing one. The meeting was adjourned and re-registration was carried out. In the vote that followed, the TT motion secured fifty-three votes, compared to the thirty-five for the resolution tabled by Sennay. At this point, Sennay declared that he dissociated himself from the congress and walked out, followed by a number of those supporting his position (Congress Minutes, 40–41).

That walkout marked the split of ESUNA into two. For what happened was that Sennay and his followers met in another venue soon after, adopted their own resolutions on the national question, and elected a new executive committee. These resolutions, while they called upon all revolutionaries to struggle for 'the unconditional demand for the right to self-determination of all the peoples and regions of Ethiopia',²¹ enjoined on them to 'insist that the exercise of the right to self-determination, including secession, be conditional on . . . adoption of a clear anti-feudal and anti-imperialist program' and '*the subordination of the question of nationalities to the demands of the class struggle*' (*Challenge*, XII, 1: 57–58). Thus, there prevailed for some years the confusing situation of two organizations with the same name, ESUNA (sometimes referred to as 'old ESUNA' and 'new ESUNA'), and identical organs, *Challenge*. The 'old ESUNA' group tried to assert their legitimacy by referring to the 'new ESUNA' group as 'the faction' or 'the factional group'; at other times, they referred to them as the '*Spark* group' or 'the Sparkists', after the title of one of their publications. Various efforts, largely half-hearted on both sides, were made to mend the split. But these 'unity talks', as they came to be known, bore no fruit. The last round of these talks, held between January and June 1973, foundered on conflicting interpretations of the causes of the split – the 'new ESUNA' group arguing that their rivals caused the split by walking out on the 19th Congress and the latter insisting that it was the former who had already walked out on the organization by abandoning the common platform of anti-feudalism and anti-imperialism and giving the

²¹ Note the relapse to 'regions' in lieu of 'nationalities'.

national question a pre-eminent position in the student movement ('On the "Unity Talks"', executive committee of 'old ESUNA', 13.07.73).

The recriminations had already started on the last day of the 19th Congress when three senior members of ESUNA – Alem Habtu, Dessalegn Rahmato and Melesse Ayalew – summed up the congress proceedings as 'a manifestation of the ascendancy of political infantilism' and a victory for 'right-wing forces' (Alem Habtu *et al.*, 27.08.71).²² They continued with an eight-page open letter from Alemayehu Fettene, the newly elected secretary-general of the new ESUNA, to 'Aklog Birara, Senay Likke & Co', reacting to their piece of 15 October 1971, in which they had claimed that the 19th congress was taken over by 'rightist' elements and giving his own version of the proceedings in highly polemical language (*Spark*, 1, 1971).²³

A more sober assessment of the proceedings of the congress was given by Eshetu Chole, who had been co-opted to chair the meeting. By his own admission, both his chairmanship and the statement that he was asked to write were unconventional, as the ESUNA president had normally presided over annual general assemblies. He wrote what he described as 'the gist of my personal observations', 'not with the intent of distributing blames but with the desire of bringing about a fresh and critical look at the position of the student movement'. He pointed out the accusations, recriminations and name-calling that had preceded the congress, particularly in the New York and North California chapters, arising mostly from the divergent stands that members had come to assume on the national question. These acrimonies were reflected within the executive council of the union, particularly between the president and the secretary. While he chastised both factions of the North California chapters for the pettiness and lack of sincerity that they betrayed in the debates, he also found it regrettable that some of the adherents of the 1969 position on the national question (i.e. the ESUNA veterans) 'did not avail themselves of the opportunity for airing their views'. He concluded by stating that the student movement should be able to accommodate 'different shades of progressive opinion', adding: 'When so much, I repeat, so much needs to be done in terms of political education, propaganda and agitation to engage in the exercise of splitism and faction forming is, in my opinion, dangerous practice' (*ibid.*).

A tragic fallout of the split and the recriminations was the suicide of the newly elected ESUNA president, Mesfin Habtu, on 1 November 1971. Mesfin had been a USUAA activist before his move to the USA, serving as its second secretary-general in 1968 and acting president in 1969. The circumstances that moved him to take his own life have not

²² The statement was appended to the report on the 'unity talks' cited above, with a footnote stating: 'These active members of our struggle have fully joined the ranks of our *reconstituted* ESUNA' (emphasis added).

²³ The other members of the new executive committee were: Mesfin Habtu (president), Abdur Ahmed (vice-president), Birku Menkir (treasurer) and Mamo Muchie (editor).

been clearly established. Although, in the press release that it issued on the occasion, the ESUNA executive council had announced the setting up of a 'special investigating committee' (*ibid.*), there is no evidence that the committee came out with any report. There seems to be, however, general agreement that Mesfin had been in a state of depression in the months preceding his death. What is not clear is whether this state of mind was induced by some of the actions of his opponents, including the interception and dissemination of his private correspondence, or by his own internal anguish at the tortuous direction the student movement was assuming. According to Tesfaye Mekonnen, he was in a deep state of depression while attending the 11th ESUE Congress in July 1971, in the course of which the ESUNA president, Sennay Lekke, distributed at night copies of the ESUNA newsletter carrying Mesfin's private correspondence. The message that Sennay wanted to send across was that Mesfin and co. were preparing to launch armed struggle (Tesfaye 1985 EC: 161f.). The irony of the whole thing is that Sennay and his colleagues in the Bay Area had been preparing for long to engage in armed struggle themselves, claiming that they would enter Ethiopia 'via Bale rather than Bole' (the province in southeastern Ethiopia rather than the airport in the capital) and leading a spartan life in preparation for that eventuality!

In February 1973, the 'old ESUNA' published an article by Yohannes Mesfin entitled 'More on the Question of Nationalities and Class Struggle in Ethiopia' (*Challenge*, XIII: 1). This was essentially a critique of the resolutions of the 11th Congress of ESUE. Although those resolutions were the very same ones that were adopted at the 19th Congress of ESUNA, there was no reference to this, apparently because it was not recognized as such. It pointed out what it considered to be a contradiction between its blanket endorsement of all national movements and its caution against secession not in the interest of the common class struggle but for the sake of economic development. It further repudiated as reactionary its call for the co-ordination of different movements organized along national (i.e. 'bourgeois') lines rather than 'the establishment of a multi-national, multi-regional revolutionary organization'. In an obvious equation of ESUE's resolutions with capitulation to the wind blowing from Addis Ababa and Algiers, it dubbed ESUE's stand as 'opportunist', so different from the much more 'scientific . . . resolutions and pronouncements' it used to come up 'in the better old days' (*ibid.*).

A more considered analysis of the fateful divisions of 1971 was issued by the executive council of the 'old ESUNA' in January 1974, on the eve of the Ethiopian Revolution, so to say. Entitled 'Towards an Analysis of the Ethiopian Student Movement and the Split in the Ethiopian Student Union in North America' (hereafter ESUNA 1974), it traced the split to December 1969, when, following the assassination of Tilahun Gizaw and the subsequent government repression, 'the student movement at home conceived wrongly the thought that students

were to become “the vanguard” of an impending Ethiopian revolution’ (ESUNA 1974: 11). In the absence of any thorough political education programme (presumably in line with ESUNA’s own famous PEP), the core group at home began to contemplate the agenda of armed struggle. It was this attitude that spilled over into the ranks of the student movement in ESUNA and precipitated the split, beginning with first the New York and Bay Area chapters and culminating in the Los Angeles congress in August 1971. It quotes liberally from the *Newsletters* of the New York Chapter in the months leading up to the congress to illustrate that the talk was very much of ‘seizing the time and seizing the gun’.²⁴ This, more than the divergent stands on the national question, was what precipitated the split. ‘The infatuation with the national question arose from the position of equating revolutionary struggle with armed struggle’ (*ibid.*, 25).²⁵ To reinforce its argument of the relatively recent history of the radicalization of the student movement, the executive council had recourse to the resolutions of the 6th Congress of NUEUS held in Addis Ababa in March 1967, which were unequivocal in their condemnation of ‘the reactionary and sectarian movements in Ethiopia’ and their supporters in the Middle East.

On the conduct of the 19th Congress itself, the report accused ‘the Spark faction’ of working to ensure a majority from the outset by insisting that all present at the Congress, irrespective of whether they were ESUNA members or had paid up their membership fees, be allowed to vote. This is not corroborated by the minutes of the congress cited above, which record that the issue of membership arose only on the last day of the congress, when the matter was going to be presented to a vote. The report, however, is also critical of the executive council at the time, singling out the conduct of both the secretary-general, who was a partisan of the TT group, and the president, whose ‘all or nothing’ approach in handling the opposition exacerbated the divisions.

It was even more unsparing in its assessment of the role of the ESUE leadership in the whole saga. In particular, it had quite a few harsh words about its purported mediation role after the split, alleging that its delegate contacted ‘mainly partisans of the Spark faction’. The final result was that ESUE ended up recognizing it as the legitimate ESUNA at its 12th Congress in Antony (France) in the summer of 1972. The authors of the report could not help gloat on the collapse of what it called ‘the marriage of convenience between the ESUE leadership and the Spark people’ as supporters of the latter in Europe and Algeria were challenging the latter’s hegemony in Europe through the WWFES. The report concludes by assigning to the

²⁴ This is a famous phraseology of the Black Panthers that occurs more than once in the writings of the student movement.

²⁵ Interestingly enough, the report concludes by stating that the armed struggle the ‘Spark faction’ ‘called for and the revolution it claimed to be around the corner are nowhere to be seen’ (*ibid.*: 34). This a couple of months before the February 1974 upsurge!

ESUE leadership the main blame for the state of affairs in which the Ethiopian student movement found itself at the time:

The ESUE leadership has always been in total ideological and political agreement with the Spark elements. What they seem to have been unhappy with is the style and vitriolic and often contradictory language of these elements . . . But these elements would not have reached this far were it not for the ideological, political and moral support the ESUE leadership provided them at every stage. Hence, the responsibility of ESUE's leadership for the disintegration of the Ethiopian student movement and the rise of adventurism as a dominant trend within the Ethiopian left. (*ibid.*: 39–41)

As if to validate the above interpretation, a member of the ESUE leadership, Andargachew Assegid, in his history of *Ma'ison*, rightly criticized the TT tract for its almost total lack of empirical data on Ethiopia. Thus, he argued, it is wrong to think that it helped Ethiopian students and leftists to understand the correct stand on the national question. He went on to assert that, apart from exposing the wrong stand of ESUNA on that question, a stand that had already led to disagreement with the ESUE leadership as well, the tract was meant to present the TT group as the 'champion' of national liberation movements, thereby facilitating its own eagerly anticipated entry into armed struggle (Andargachew 2000: 89–90). What is intriguing in Andargachew's analysis is that, while both the old ESUNA leadership and the ESUE leadership had a common antipathy to TT, when it came to the crunch, ESUE effectively adopted the TT thesis at its 11th Congress, much to the chagrin of the old ESUNA leadership.

In the end, the stand taken at the 11th ESUE Congress and the 19th ESUNA Congress became the position of the Left. Both *Ma'ison* and EPRP incorporated the 'principle of self-determination up to and including secession' in their respective constitutions. Likewise, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which had its genesis on the fringes of the Ethiopian student movement, became an advocate of the principle. As an ethno-nationalist organization, it had the greatest incentive to adhere to that principle. Where the divergence between it and the two multi-national political organizations, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and *Ma'ison*, emerged was on the stand they took on Eritrea. The latter two continued to treat the Eritrean question as a national one, i.e. a problem that could find its resolution within the Ethiopian framework. This was the basis of the initial rapport between EPLF and EPRP, the former facilitating the latter's establishment of a base for armed struggle at a place called Asimba in the northeastern district of Tigray. This initial rapport came to an end when EPLF insisted that the Eritrean question should be viewed as a colonial question and not as national one, i.e. that it should be considered as having the ultimate objective of independence, as had been the case with all anti-colonial struggles. EPRP's refusal to agree to this and TPLF's readiness to do so contributed to the realignment

of forces that resulted in the eviction of EPRP from Tigray – and hence the arena of armed struggle – and the final alliance of EPLF and TPLF to overthrow the Darg.

In the second half of the 1970s, the multi-national left began to revise its thesis on the national question, putting the accent more and more on class struggle. This is evident in a special issue of *Combat*, the organ of the new ESUNA, that came out in March 1976. Apparently written in reaction to the writings and activities of EFLNA, a sort of youth wing of EPLF, the monograph (it exceeded 150 pages) was entitled 'The National Question in Ethiopia: Proletarian Internationalism or Bourgeois Nationalism'. The editorial note that preceded the feature article stated that, until then, the target has been 'big nationality chauvinism and social chauvinism'.²⁶ The time has now come, however, 'to wage a more systematic and resolute struggle against local nationalism',²⁷ 'which finds its most finished expression in . . . EFLNA'. Contrary to 'bourgeois nationalists', who gear national struggles to their own narrow interests, 'proletarian internationalists' view the national question within the context of 'class oppression and class exploitation'. Hence, the solution of the national question is inextricably linked with revolution and class struggle. The article concludes with the following emphatic assertion of the importance of waging class struggle under the leadership of a multi-national organization uniting all workers:

One may wear all sorts of masks to hide one's bourgeois nationalism. One may even talk of socialism, revolution, etc. Yet, if one does not uphold the unity of all workers in a given state, but on the contrary upholds their division along national lines; if one does not uphold the multi-national type of proletarian organization, but on the contrary upholds the national type of organization; if one does not work to amalgamate in the closest manner all proletarian organizations in a given state, but on the contrary works to split up those already united, then one is a bourgeois nationalist – no matter what mask one may wear. (*Combat*, March 1976: 56)

The rest of the treatise is largely a repudiation of the EPLF and EFLNA thesis that the Eritrean question is a colonial, and not a national, question. It argues that 'Ethiopia at present is not a multi-national colonial empire but a semi-feudal and semi-colonial country suffering from imperialist oppression' (*ibid.*: 59). The parallel with Portuguese colonialism that Eritrean nationalists draw is thus erroneous as the two countries exhibit differing levels of capitalist development. On the other hand, the debate as to whether Eritrea was historically independent or an integral part of Ethiopia is a sterile one as 'the question of secession must be appraised from the requirement

²⁶ The former referring to the chauvinism of the ruling class and its adherents and the latter to that of progressives (or socialists), like the old members of ESUNA.

²⁷ 'Local nationalism', or in its more customary rendering 'narrow nationalism', referred to the sort of nationalism of the oppressed nationalities that ruled out working together with even progressives of the dominant nationalities.

of the *present-day* struggle of the proletariat and from the requirements of the *future* struggles for socialism' (*ibid.*: 93; original emphasis). The recipe for resolving the national question in the rest of Ethiopia is curiously reminiscent of the old ESUNA thesis: 'regional autonomy in areas inhabited by compact masses of oppressed nationalities . . . abolish all traces of national oppression; . . . ensure the equal development of all languages and cultures' (*ibid.*: 79). Thus, things seem to have come full circle, rendering the post-1971 acrimonious divisions over the national question completely superfluous, were they not costly.

THE WOMAN QUESTION

At about the time the debate on the national question was attaining its climax, the question of the oppression of women began to come to the fore. It started with the growing conviction that women were the victims of double oppression – of class and gender – and culminated in the establishment of separate women organizations to address these concerns. These organizations started as women study groups in countries and chapters and eventually coalesced into the World Wide Ethiopian Women's Study Group (WWEWSG). While these strivings might have contributed to growing awareness of the oppression and exploitation of women and the prevalence of what came to be known as male chauvinism, it is not universally agreed that they actually resulted in the liberation of women. On the contrary, there has persisted the strong belief that women – even when they were liberated and conscious – were sought more for their support in the tussle for power among male-dominated organizations than as leaders of the liberation struggle. This marginalization of women has manifested itself even in cases where they have paid the ultimate sacrifice of engaging in armed struggle – of the urban or rural vintage – against oppressive regimes and systems.

'The battle of the sexes'

In the history of Ethiopian student activism, the 1960s were characterized by what could be called 'the battle of the sexes', to borrow a phrase from a 1961 editorial of *News and Views*. This was amply evident in the contributions to student papers at UCAA, the birthplace of the student movement: from *UCAA Newsletter* in the late 1950s to *News and Views* in the 1960s. In a way, the 'fashion show incident' of 1968 (see Chapter 4) was the high point of this battle, preceded as it was by a particularly vitriolic attack on female students by one of the most radical student leaders.

Both the marginalization of women and the refusal, even by the most progressive male students, to accept them as equals emanated from the strongly patriarchal nature of highland Ethiopian society. In Ethiopian society, women's role was largely perceived as being confined to the

realms of procreation and house-keeping. When it came to matters of organization, they were expected to be followers rather than leaders. There is perhaps no more dramatic illustration of this prevalent attitude than the fact that all the officers (president, vice-president, secretary-general and treasurer) elected in 1956 for what was an intrinsically a women's organization – i.e. the Ethiopian Women's Welfare Association – were men! (AZ, 3.13.48/8.9.56).

Given such a background, it is not perhaps amazing that the first gender-related expressions of students in their publications had an unabashedly male chauvinist character about them. The tone was set by the topic chosen for a debate in the 1950s: 'Is Emancipation of Women Beneficial to Society?' (UCC, No. 1 1956). Interestingly enough, even as late as 1964, the UCAA Debating Society could organize a debate on the topic 'Higher Education for Women is Undesirable' (N&V, XI: 19). At the beginning of the academic year 1958/59, the college newsletter reported that, 'fortunately or unfortunately, our young ladies are soon to form a separate [student] council to settle their own problems, if they have any, and to discuss matters regarding their group' (UCAAN, II: 1). What was surprising was that even some of the African scholarship students, who were generally presumed to be more enlightened than their Ethiopian colleagues, were not free from such biases. One of them wrote with perfect equanimity that women should be sent to the kitchen rather than abroad, as their essential tasks were procreation and keeping men happy (UCAAN II: 28). This was in response to a more compassionate piece by another scholarship student, who had deplored the confinement of female students to their dorms after 7 pm and the fact that only 3rd and 4th year students were allowed to visit the library. The result was the nearly 50 per cent attrition rate of female students. Under the circumstances, he concluded, female students should either be sent abroad or be equipped with their own library (UCAAN II: 27).

The 'battle of the sexes', or what one male student dismayed at the acrimonious exchanges called a 'cold war' (N&V, V: 20), continued *ad nauseam* throughout the late 1950s and to the late 1960s. The numerically under-represented female students (about 10 per cent of the total student population in 1959) were subjected to a barrage of taunts and downright insults. Although five female representatives had been assigned to the student newspaper in late 1959, the Views editor of *News and Views* expressed his frustration at the absence of female contributors by dubbing Saba Hall, the dormitory for female students, 'that sanctuary for wagging tongues and apparently little or no writing activity'. He went on: 'What use is their proclaiming that they are as intelligent as men? Had they not better give up the battle for intellectual superiority, declare themselves inferior to men and go back to the kitchen?' (N&V, III: 11). Some two years later, an editorial of the same paper called female students 'Strangers on the Campus', adding: 'Although they are physically present in this campus they are strangers. They are neither active in

the extra-curricular fields nor in the intellectual sphere. They do not have anything to add to the students activities except boredom and dullness, disinterestedness and passivity' (N&V, IV: 20).

While female students had their male defenders, they themselves did not always bear these assaults in silence, either. Thus, in a December 1961 issue of *News & Views*, one Bezuayehu Agonafer challenged the male detractors to 'pick out more than twenty gentlemen who can be called active' (N&V, IV: 22, 6.4.61). Another female student, who simply signed her contribution as 'a "Sabean"' quoted lines from an English poem to underscore the fickleness of men:

If you smile at him, he thinks you're flirty;
If you don't, he thinks you're an iceberg;
If you let him kiss you, he wishes you were more reserved;
If you don't, he seeks consolation elsewhere;
If you flatter him, he thinks you're simple;
If you don't, he thinks you don't understand;
If you go around with other fellows, he thinks you're fickle;
If you don't, he thinks no one else will have you;
Men! God bless them! You can't get along with them,
But what would the basketball team do without them?

Even in the second half of the 1960s, when students had begun to agitate around fundamental issues of social concern, the attitude of male students to their female counterparts left much to be desired. As if making it to college against all the odds were not challenging enough, female students were subjected to considerable harassment and ridicule. Students, particularly female ones, recall that, at the entrance to the new building at the main campus that was inaugurated in 1965, they had to pass through a veritable gauntlet of jeers and name-calling tailored to their bodily appearance before they could reach the comparative safety of their classrooms. Even the radical USUAA did not initially represent a departure from that tradition. The cartoonist of *Struggle*, the USUAA organ, specialized in drawing caricatures of female students. The Miss USUAA beauty contest ended disastrously after one of the winners died falling off a building as she tried to escape from the advances of someone who tried to molest her (Bahru 2010: 117).

This gender warfare formed the backdrop to the 'fashion show incident' of 1968 which snowballed into a major confrontation between students and the authorities (see Chapter 4 for details). As already described, the dress rehearsal for it was played out one year earlier when the American counsellor for female students, Linda Thistle, organized what was dubbed 'Fashion Tea'. What infuriated the radicals was not only the holding of an event deemed to be exotic, nay culturally degrading, but also its coincidence with the University Day, when students customarily displayed in public their opposition to the regime through poems and other performances. This was apparently what prompted Walelign Mekonnen to write a few days before the 1968 incident the highly vituperative piece on campus girls cited above.

Netsanet Mengistu, a female activist of the late 1960s and early 1970s, credits Tilahun Gizaw, president of USUAA in late 1969, with initiating a new tradition of bringing female students to the political fold. Soon after his election, he proceeded to the girls' hostel with other USUAA officials to get them interested in readings and political discussions. Another student activist who drew a number of female students into the political struggle, largely through the study groups that began to mushroom in the early 1970s, was Yohannes Berhane. The person who probably epitomized the growing activism of female students was Marta Mebratu, who gave up a promising career in the medical profession to take part in the disastrous hijacking operation of December 1972 (see Chapter 5). Yet, only one female managed to make it to USUAA Congress membership (OR: 193–4). There is no record of any female student, either at home or abroad, rising to executive position. The only major exception to this prevalent picture was Abebech Bekele, president of the WFEWSG, who was elected president of the newly established World Wide Federation of Ethiopian Students (WWFES) in April 1973. But, on the basis of her own testimony, the post was literally thrust on her for reasons she could not quite comprehend.

Double, nay multiple, oppression

As indicated above, it is largely in the early 1970s that the Ethiopian student movement began to be cognizant of, and then tackled, the oppression of women. Abebech, who was to play the leading role in organizing female students abroad to fight male domination, traces her own awakening to the occupation of the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington DC in July 1969. She and Tsehay Yeshitela were the only two women involved in that eventful saga (see Chapter 5 for details). The active solidarity shown by African-American lawyers from Harlem and members of the Black Panther movement in the campaign to secure the release of the detained students created an important link that was continued subsequently. Abebech began to participate in the weekly study groups of the Black Panthers and increasingly became aware of the need for a separate organization for women as a forum for free and uninhibited expression of their views. She was reinforced in her convictions by the newly arrived Mesfin Habtu and Abdul Mohammed as well as through correspondence with Benyam Adane, who was based in Algiers (OI Abebech).

Once she became convinced of the need for a separate women's organization, albeit in the form of a study group, the next task was to spread the gospel. At first, according to her, it was not so easy to penetrate the ESUE structure, the leadership being not overly enthusiastic about a separate women's organization.²⁸ Through her friend, Yeshi,

²⁸ Abebech ruefully recalls that when she asked the ESUE leadership for a contact address, she was given the name of Negede Gobeze. Blissfully assuming that it must be the name of a female comrade, she dutifully wrote a letter to him addressing him as 'Dear Sister'. She recalls that Negede responded to her that there was no need for a separate women's organization.

who was going to the Soviet Union to attend to her ailing sister, she managed to persuade female students in France and the Soviet Union to organize their own study groups. The first meetings of women's study groups in North America and Europe were held in August 1971 (*Tanash Ityopyawit*, I: 2). It was these two study groups that eventually coalesced into the WFEWSG, of which Abebech became the obvious head. By 1975, the membership had grown to ninety-five. Links were also established with women activists at home, through the agency of Genet Zewde, who had been to Boston for her Masters, and Marta Mebratu, who dutifully distributed WFEWSG publications both in the capital and in the provinces (OI Abebech).

WFEWSG started its publication in February 1972 with *Tanash Labadarit* ('Arise, Ye Female Proletarian'), which was replaced after its first issue by *Tanash Ityopyawit* ('Arise, Ye Female Ethiopian'). According to Abebech, the change of name was largely through the advice of Benyam Adane, who reminded her that the goal of the Ethiopian student movement was a national democratic revolution, which rallies all anti-feudal and anti-imperialist forces, rather than proletarian revolution, which would be only the ultimate stage (OI Abebech). The second issue traced the historical evolution of women's oppression through the classical five stages of social evolution – communal, slave mode of production, feudalism, capitalism and socialism – and examined women's status under customary law (with focus on Amhara-Tigre, Gurage, Oromo and Somali societies) and their rights under the Ethiopian civil code (*Tanash Ityopyawit*, I: 2). Subsequent issues carried articles on the role of educated women in Ethiopia, a biographical sketch of Marta Mebratu, who was killed during the hijacking incident in December 1972, and a poster calling on the 'American puppet regime' to free the other female hijacker, Tadelech Kidane Mariam, who had been wounded and detained (*ibid.*, II: 1; II: 2).

Nor was the woman question confined to women's study groups. Indeed, it became one of the major areas of concern in the student movement, often raised and discussed in conjunction with the national question. Thus, it is interesting that the resolutions of the 11th Congress of ESUE on the national question (July 1971) were accompanied by resolutions on the woman question. The study that formed the basis for the resolutions was apparently provided by the North American study group. This followed what was to become a standard Marxist-Leninist exposé of the question by tracing the status of women through the five classical stages of social evolution. The resolutions that were adopted at the Berlin Congress underscored the double oppression of women and recognized their right to organize separately to overcome it, including the setting up of a women's study group in Europe and the formation of a world-wide Ethiopian women study group. They also condemned the regime for its discriminatory policy against women and its tolerance of the spread of prostitution. The ultimate solution of the woman question, however, can only come not through reform or charity but through

an anti-feudal and anti-imperialist revolution (*Teglachen*, Hedar 1964/November 1971).

Likewise, the resolutions on the national question adopted by the Sennay Lekke group after its walkout from the 19th Congress in August 1971 contained resolutions on the woman question as well. Probably consistent with their cautious stand on the national question, these resolutions on the woman question were less unequivocal on the need for separate organization for women students. While they encouraged 'all the sisters in the different chapters to engage in women's study groups', they nonetheless emphasized the fact that 'The oppression and exploitation of women is a question of class oppression and as such cannot be looked at in an isolated manner from the class struggle in the Ethiopian society' (Resolutions of the 19th Congress).

A more elaborate treatment of the question appeared in the November 1973 issue of *Challenge*.²⁹ The forty-six-page article, which showed some evidence of empirical research on the historical evolution of the question and the state of female student enrolment at all levels of education in Ethiopia, underscored its importance and scoffed at its relegation to tertiary significance, after the class and national question. It hit at both the 'male supremacist' view and the other extreme, the 'syndicalist view of seeing the woman question not as part of the class struggle but seeing "all males" as the enemy' (*Challenge*, XIV, 1: 4). After a cursory survey of the position of women in Ethiopian history, the author unequivocally asserts that the essay is concerned with the downtrodden peasant and working class women, and not with ruling class women, who belong to the oppressive class. The oppression that ruling class women suffer as women did not seem to be of concern to the author. The author rightly underscored the low level of participation of women in the student movement. While the article hailed the emergence of women's study groups in the past few years, it emphasized the need for personal transformation to go in tandem with theoretical sophistication and active participation: 'No understanding of theory, no amount of participation at meetings is going to make us progressives in the true sense of the word unless we consciously try to commit our theoretical understanding to changing our lives, our views and those of society at large' (*ibid.*: 44).

The question of the need for a separate organization for women was to be a subject of considerable debate in the ranks of the student movement abroad. On the one hand were the students, mostly male, who did not see the need for such a separate organization as they were all fighting a common class enemy and as the liberation of women can only come through a fundamental transformation of society. The women's study groups and their male supporters argued, on the other hand, that women were subjected to gender oppression as well as class oppression and they needed to organize themselves separately to

²⁹ From the jabs at the 'Spark faction' (*ibid.*: 42), the essay was apparently written by a member of the old ESUNA.

combat the former. Indeed, the talk was not only of double oppression (i.e. of class and gender, *dereb cheqona* in Amharic) but also of triple or multiple oppression (*dereb, derebreb cheqona*), involving class, gender and national oppression, as was the case with working class women in the southern parts of Ethiopia. This did not mean that they could not have male allies in the struggle. Contrary to the feminist movement so prevalent in the West at the time, they did not target men as such but the oppressive and exploitative system that engendered male chauvinism (*Tanash Ityopyawit*, II: 2). Nonetheless, they needed their separate organization to address their unique problems and to mobilize women for the struggle. Social change can come only through the active participation of women, just as oppression of women can only end through social change.

Controversial as it might have been, the independence of women's organizations did not last long. It was caught in the power struggle that unfolded within the student movement in the mid-1970s. Externally, WWEWSG came solidly behind the WWFES, which was evolving as the youth wing of what was eventually to emerge as the EPRP. In Europe, there emerged two factions of the women's study group, one supporting WWFES and the other affiliated to the pro-*Ma'ison* ESUE. These tussles were transposed onto Ethiopian soil after the eruption of the 1974 revolution, when the two emerging leftist parties vied for control of the co-ordinating committee set up to organize women. While EPRP was able to mobilize a number of remarkable women combatants in its ill-fated urban struggle to unseat the Darg, a number of the survivors of that bloody confrontation note with bitterness the lack of recognition of this exceptional self-sacrifice in even the 'official' history of the party by Kiflu Tadesse (OR: 202). After the liquidation of the two leftist parties in 1976–77, the Darg appropriated the woman question and gave it its own statist and male-oriented interpretation by setting up the satellite Revolutionary Ethiopian Women's Association (REWA).

7

Fusion and Fission: From Student Unions to Leftist Political Organizations

You should realize that you would be solely responsible for all the problems that would arise in the future from this issue of the Federation.¹

The Ethiopian student movement produced a number of organizations both at home and abroad. The process was characterized by alternating phenomena of fusion and fission. We have already seen in Chapter 3 the emergence of the University College Union (UCU) at University College of Addis Ababa (UCAA) and of the National Union of Ethiopian University Students (NUEUS) as an umbrella national organization inside the country, as well as that of the Ethiopian Students Association in North America (ESANA, later changed to ESUNA when the Association was renamed a union) and the Ethiopian Students Union in Europe (ESUE). The second half of the 1960s saw the continuation of NUEUS, ESANA and ESUE and the replacement of UCU first by the Main Campus Student Union (MCSU) and soon after – as a matter of fact, within a year – by the University Students Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA). In a somewhat similar manner as NUEUS was formed at home, Ethiopian students abroad also set up an umbrella organization known as the World Wide Union of Ethiopian Students (WWUES) to co-ordinate the activities of the two regional organizations as well as that of NUEUS. Even more than its domestic counterpart, however, WWUES remained a shadow organization, with most of the main activities being undertaken by its constituent units, mainly ESUE and ESUNA.

What these developments underscore is the importance that students had come to assume in national politics. This came largely because the country's authoritarian tradition had allowed no space for the emergence of political parties. By default, therefore, student organizations came to arrogate to themselves the role and character of political parties, with all the paraphernalia of such organizations, including governing councils, rights and obligations of membership, annual congresses and official publications. There were also the inevitable tensions arising from differing political perceptions of the role of

¹ ESUE to WWFES, 23.7.74.

student unions. This manifested itself first in the formation of MCSU and soon after that of USUAA. The external wing of the student movement showed a remarkable degree of consensus until the early 1970s. The process of fission started in 1971, when ESUNA split into two antagonistic factions following its 19th Congress in Los Angeles. The effort to transform WWUES into the World Wide Federation of Ethiopian Students (WWFES) in 1973 resulted in the split of ESUE and ushered in a period of the most vitriolic ideological and organizational warfare in the student movement. That warfare was to have lethal consequences when transposed to the home terrain after the 1974 revolution. It was only in retrospect that most people came to realize that these factional bickerings around WWFES were in actual fact the outward manifestations of the vying for hegemony of the two leftist political organizations – *Ma'ison* and Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) – that had been formed in clandestine fashion in the meantime.

FROM MCSU TO USUAA

The academic year 1965/1966 proved eventful in the history of student organizations. The beginning of the year saw the long-anticipated, not to say dreaded, termination of the historic UCAA with the transfer of the Faculties of Arts and Education from the Arat Kilo campus to the main campus (as it has come to be called) in Seddest Kilo. The two faculties were housed in the recently finished New Classroom Building, Arts occupying the first two floors, Education the third. The fourth floor was occupied by the College of Business Administration, which, as seen already in Chapter 3, had come to be located in the main campus as early as 1963, when the Department of Commerce was moved from Arat Kilo and upgraded to college status. Students of the college had then constituted their own union known as the College of Business Administration Union (CBAU). Students of the Law Faculty, located on the other side of the campus, had also formed the Law Students Association. Another unit located in the campus prior to 1965 was also the School of Social Work, although it is not clear whether its students had managed to form an association.

The initiative for the formation of MCSU naturally came from the students of the newly relocated Arts and Education students, who found themselves without any student organization now that their old UCU had become redundant following the breakup of UCAA. It was not too difficult for the new arrivals to justify the drive for the formation of a campus-wide union in place of the splintered discipline-based associations. They justified it by pointing to the need to address common student problems with one voice, the creation of a more viable constituent unit for NUEUS and the general principle of unity. Their initiative met with mixed reactions from students of

the already established units, with Social Work 'wholeheartedly in favour', Law ambivalent and CBAU adamantly opposed. Nevertheless, because membership to MCSU was on an individual basis, there were ninety-four members from College of Business Administration (CBA) and fourteen from the Law School. In fact, Bekele Alemu, a fourth year CBA student, came to be elected to the post of vice-president of MCSU. The campus-wide union got added boost with its recognition as the only student organization on campus by the Student Affairs Committee (SAC) (*N&V*, 2nd series, I: 3).

In spite of these acrimonies, the election campaign for the offices of MCSU lived up to the tradition of the colourful UCU campaigns of the past. American Field Service returnees, canvassing support for their candidate by distributing pins and other election paraphernalia, also gave the campaign a distinctly American flavour. The prevalent apprehension of the raw and generally unpredictable freshmen led the election organizers to bend the principle of 'one man, one vote' even further by reducing their vote value from one-half to one-third! All the same, it was the freshmen's favourite, Eshetu Chole, who won the presidency beating three other candidates (Fanuel Deggie, Guta Sirnessa and Paulos Milkias). His inaugural speech was a passionate call for unity, addressed primarily to the recalcitrant CBAU. That the call fell on deaf ears became all too evident soon enough when the issue of the campus union came to dominate the 5th Congress of NUEUS in February 1966. The MCSU leadership claimed that it was the sole representative of all students on the main campus. The leaders of CBAU and Law Students Association, supported by the president of the Alemaya College Students Union, resisted these efforts to subsume them within MCSU. The debate attained a comic finale when the lawyers pitted against the MCSU came up with a rather elastic definition of the word 'campus' to include the 'lawn' or the 'floor' that separates one educational unit from another, in reference to the ground and the floor that separated the Law School and CBA, respectively, from Arts and Education! (Personal recollection corroborated by OI Tesfatsion.)

In late 1965 and early 1966, supporters of MCSU were clearly in a celebratory mood. But there were also some lingering doubts. The leadership was disappointed with the low level of member participation in union activities. There were also passionate calls for unity, as was the case with the letter on 27 December 1965 by Andeberhan Wolde Giorgis, interestingly enough from the CBA, who urged his fellow students to direct their 'efforts and campus politics to the solution of our common problems rather than to slanderous comments about ourselves' (*N&V*, 2nd series, I: 1). On 11 January 1966, Fasil Abebe wrote an article hailing the formation of MCSU and rejected the view that it was a disguise for domination by Arts students, as its opponents had apparently feared. He ventured further to deny any fundamental differences in the ideological orientation of students: 'The prevalent notion . . . that Arts students are communist in inclination

is as erroneous as the supposition that Business students are pro-American'. The Cold War, he concluded, should not be imported into the campus (*N&V*, 2nd series, I: 2).

It was not long, however, before the celebration of MCSU was overtaken by a development that led to the formation of a union with an even broader mandate. What eventually metamorphosed into USUAA started as a city-wide union, pushing the frontiers of unity even further beyond the campus to the entire city. According to a report in the *University Reporter*, the idea was initiated in December 1965 by groups of students fed up with the mutual bickering of local unions. Although it was not stated, the desire to make maximum impact through a broader organizational framework must have also weighed in behind the move. At any rate, a thirty-six-person steering committee chaired by Baro Tumsa, UCU president in 1964/65, was formed to implement the idea. The first months of 1966 thus saw heated debates between proponents of the campus unions, mainly leaders of MCSU, and those of the city-wide union (*UR*, I: 1).² Interestingly enough, as in the case of MCSU vis-à-vis CBAU and Law Students Association, the idea of a city-wide union had the blessing of the university administration, which preferred to deal with one union than with a host of disparate student organizations (Balsvik 1985: 165). Little did it suspect that the new union would pose for it a much more formidable challenge than the earlier student organizations.

The early history of USUAA was quite a troubled one and the acrimony that attended its birth might well have cast a long shadow on the character of future student debates. The new organization had widespread opposition in many of the campuses. This opposition arose partly from attachment to the vibrancy that has characterized life under the campus unions, which the rather amorphous character of the new organization threatened to undermine. In the case of the main campus, students had just started to savour the rich campus life that their new union seemed to promise when they were told to dump it for a new transcendent organization. But, beneath these differing approaches to student organization lay divergent ideological orientations and perceptions of the role of the student movement, although these were not always clearly articulated. Thus, although USUAA was inaugurated in April 1966, the campus unions still remained in place and the new organization had yet to get the endorsement of the national organization, NUEUS. On the other hand, as already indicated, USUAA rather unexpectedly got the blessing of the university administration. The chairman of SAC, 'Dean' James Paul, was one of the speakers at the inaugural ceremony, when he preached the virtues of unity (*ibid.*: 265f.). This support of the university administration, which had the utilitarian objective of dealing with one city-wide student organization

² Balsvik (1985: 165) makes Fisseha Bayeh, who was subsequently elected as USUAA's first president, chairman of the steering committee. In actual fact, he only chaired the group that had initiated the idea in December 1965.

rather than with a wide array of campus unions, soon waned in face of the militancy of USUAA.

Opposition to the newly formed city-wide union necessitated the holding of a referendum under the auspices of NUEUS in November 1966. Although the city-wide union won the day, it was by the narrowest of margins. The generally reliable *University Reporter* gives the fractional margin of 'one-third of a vote' (UR, I: 1). This is somewhat corroborated by the remark attributed to the former president of MCSU, Eshetu Chole, that 'it is better to lose than win by half a vote' (Bahru 2010: 15). The fractional vote was that of a freshman, evidence of the persistence of the distrust of the inexperienced but adventurous freshmen, although Hailu Ayele believes that the city-wide union idea prevailed partly because the freshmen, who were largely supportive of it, were awarded a one-half rather than the one-third vote to which they had been condemned in the preceding academic year.

This referendum was followed by another one on the new USUAA constitution drafted by a ten-man committee, with one member from each faculty. This was carried through by a bigger margin than the union itself was able to garner. According to the *University Reporter* report cited above, 406 students (i.e. 60.9 per cent) voted in favour of the constitution while 261 (39.1 per cent) voted against. An announcement of the results of a referendum on the USUAA constitution dated 16 December 1966 gives us additional information about the breakdown of the votes as well as the voting pattern of the various faculties. According to this document, Arts and Education students generally supported while Science and Medicine students opposed the constitution. Interestingly enough, the result for the College of Business Administration, generally considered a bastion of American influence, was ninety-seven and a half for and thirty-six against. The figures for freshmen were ninety-seven for and sixty-nine against while for upper class students they were 309 for and 192 against (IES CL, 2395/05/69).

Whatever the margin, opponents of USUAA were convinced that the new organization did not have an unequivocal mandate, and this is what led to a concerted effort to restore the campus unions in 1967. What came to be known as the Restoration Committee (RC), chaired first by Gebru Mersha and then by Abera Yemaneab, campaigned for almost the entire year to restore the campus unions. In March, it submitted a petition with 751 signatures calling for such a restoration. In response, SAC appointed a sub-committee to follow up the matter but insisted that all changes have to follow procedures laid down in the USUAA constitution. This was something that the leaders of the RC were not prepared to accept as they did not recognize either USUAA or its constitution and had furthermore been receiving death threats (UR, I: 8). The USUAA secretary-general for his part described the activities of the RC as subversive, arguing in the maiden issue of the union's paper, *Struggle*, that 'USUAA was not born overnight. It was the result of a genuine effort on the part of the University students of Addis Ababa

to satisfy the needs that the new trend of developments has imposed on the student movement' (*Struggle*, I: 1). The second issue of the paper carried an anonymous article which commented on the dangers that the new organization faced 'because of the bitter seeds of discord sown by these unidentified hooligans'.³ The editorial called more soberly for a broad democratic front, arguing that the differences:

should not be left alone to cripple the Ethiopian student movement. They cannot prevent us from forming a Wide Democratic Front that would enable us to mobilize all students for a systematic and persistent struggle for the fundamental human rights of our people and against the shameful exploitation of the majority by the minority. Later on history shall resolve the contradictions that exist within our organization. (*Struggle*, I: 2)

The controversy was soon overshadowed by the events of April 1967, when student protests against the anti-demonstration bill led to massive repression and the temporary closure of the university. Leaders of the RC claimed that they were forced to postpone their campaign, although the dissolution of USUAA was deemed a *fait accompli* because of the overwhelming support for the RC (*UR*, I: 18). USUAA leaders on the other hand argued that the success of the protests was evidence of the unity that USUAA had managed to forge among the students in the face of the massive government repression (*UR*, I: 22). At any rate, the contest was deferred to the following academic year. In October 1967, a *Struggle* editorial opened the fray with an emphatic call to maintain unity and a ringing denunciation of what it called secessionism. It wrote:

One should be aware of the wolves in sheep's clothing, the fiendish divisionists, whose principle rests on archaic and reactionary values. We have taken the great leap forward from a conglomeration of small, divided, weak unions to a powerful, single, City-Wide Union. We must never try to leap backwards; it might be fatal. We will forge our way to the bright future that awaits us just around the corner. (*Struggle*, I: 3)

Undaunted by the rhetoric, in November 1967, the RC asked for the convening of a general assembly and the holding of a referendum on the basis of the previous year's petition. USUAA rejected the request, arguing that the petition had been rendered invalid by the fact that the composition of the student body had changed in the meantime. The RC had no difficulty in filing a new petition with 796 signatures. The campuses, particularly the main one, were abuzz with the debate on the relative merits of the two organizational formats, proponents of USUAA forwarding its mobilizing capacity while critics pointed to its 'inefficient and bureaucratic' nature. The New Classroom Building

³ Why the author feigned ignorance about the identity of the leaders of the Committee is not clear, as they were well-known to the student body.

(NCR, as it was known for short) was plastered with posters of the rival groups (*UR*, II: 6, 7).

But the 'debate' soon degenerated into violence and denunciation, initiating a culture that was to persist in the student movement, much to its detriment. Rejecting the RC's call for a city-wide referendum, USUAA called meetings (local editions, so to say, of the General Assembly) in the various campuses. The meeting at the main campus, where USUAA had its strongest base, was adjourned inconclusively after a riotous and charged debate, in the course of which twenty-three chairs were broken. At the second meeting, USUAA was able to secure majority support, with 670 out of the 900 or more students voting for it. The situation was even more riotous at the Arat Kilo campus. The first meeting was disrupted by Seddest Kilo students marching into the cafeteria, chanting 'USUAA! USUAA!' A second meeting had to be adjourned for lack of a quorum (*UR*, II: 9, 10). In the end, the whole 'debate' fizzled out and USUAA came to stay, reinforcing the hegemony of the radical Left in student politics.

What the ascendancy of USUAA heralded was the end of the relatively more democratic discussion of issues that was evident in the early days of student activism. Gone were the days of the UCAA Debating Society when proponents and opponents of a motion could argue openly defending or opposing a motion that they did not necessarily believe in personally. This lack of democratic deliberation was bemoaned sometime in the late 1960s or early 1970s by a group that called itself 'The Rescuers', apparently a successor of 'The Restorers'. They cited the case of a meeting where students were asked to vote over the continued boycott of classes until all their demands were met. When it became clear that 'the overwhelming majority' of those assembled voted against the motion, the presiding chair asked for a recount and, in the second round of voting, had only those who supported the motion counted. 'The Rescuers' also lamented the dominant group's habit of not only labelling students who entertained views different from them as 'saboteurs, agents, cowards . . . etc.', but of even going to the extent of beating them up (IES CL, 2393/07/1/19).

Allegations of one such harassment are reported in the *University Reporter* of 17 March 1967. It was made by Nigatu Molla, the leader of the Alemaya College delegation that was attending the 6th NUEUS Congress at Ras Makonnen Hall in the main campus of the university. He claimed that two students (Zer'u Kishen and Getachew Haile) followed him to the bathroom with intent to attack him because he had opposed a commission report on international relations. The Alemaya delegation had also walked out of the congress at the inclusion of the newly formed USUAA without amending the NUEUS constitution (*UR*, I: 5,6). Nigatu had a reputation as a pro-American opponent of the radicalization of the student movement. At the 5th NUEUS Congress in 1966, he had given fervent and eloquent support to CBAU and the Law Students Association in their opposition to MCSU (see p. 231 above).

FROM WWUES TO WWFES

As we have seen above, the efforts inside the country to set up an umbrella organization to co-ordinate the activities of the various student organizations goes back to the 1950s. This led to the creation first of National Union of Ethiopian Students and then the more restricted NUEUS. Although the first president of that organization had come from Alemaya University, in subsequent years, the organization tended to be submerged under the activities of the university student union inside the capital, be it UCU in earlier days or USUAA in subsequent years. Similar efforts were exerted outside the country to establish an umbrella organization for student unions both inside and outside the country. According to a special issue of *Challenge* dedicated to the World Wide Federation of Ethiopian Students (WWFES) in the wake of its establishment in April 1973, the first such efforts can be traced back to 1963. A *Tataq* editorial of March 1964 thus called for the setting up of a world-wide organization, a 'federation' of the unions that already existed in Europe, North America and the Middle East, as well as in Ethiopia. The ESUE president at the time, Tekle Maryam Zeggu, elaborated on the editorial by underscoring the need to present a strong and united voice of Ethiopian students scattered all over the world (*Tataq, Magabit* 1956/March 1964).

But the matter was not taken up in earnest until the 7th ESUE Congress in Montargue (France) in August 1967, when the World Wide Union of Ethiopian Students (WWUES) was set up. The president of NUEUS, who happened to be passing through Europe at the time, also attended that meeting (*Challenge*, XIII: 1, August 1973). According to the constitution adopted at that meeting, the world-wide union had four major objectives: to struggle for the creation of a people's democratic Ethiopia, to co-ordinate the struggles of the various Ethiopian student organizations, to safeguard the rights of students and to establish links with similar African and international organizations. The constitution provided for a congress of the representatives of the constituent units to be held 'every two or three years' (emphasis added) and an executive committee chaired by the president of NUEUS (WWUES Constitution, ESUNA documents). But, the representation of NUEUS in the world-wide organization, let alone its leadership, became untenable as the domestic repression intensified, particularly after 1969, effectively making WWUES an ESUE-ESUNA club, with leadership of the world-wide union alternating between the executive committees of the two organizations.

This ineffectual state of the world-wide organization prompted the two executive committees to try and reinvigorate the moribund organization. This was done in the wings of the 12th Congress of ESUE in 1972. The meeting of the two executive committees gave particular attention to the streamlining of student publications, designating the ESUE bulletin, *Teglachen*, as a newsletter and *Tataq* (ESUE) and *Challenge* (ESUNA) as theoretical journals in Amharic and English,

respectively. It was from that time on that the publications started to appear as journals of WWUES, although all the publication work was done by the respective constituent organizations, i.e. ESUE or ESUNA. Also included in the objectives of the union, according to the recommendations of the meeting, was advising students returning home after the completion of their studies to organize themselves and help one another. The meeting also recommended that the WWUES Congress, which was expanded to include representatives of the editorial boards of the journals, should meet once a year around Christmas and should have its own secretariat, ideally selected from the same region. Also proposed for inclusion into the world-wide union were the World-Wide Ethiopian Women's Study Group (WWEWSG) and the Ethiopian Students Union in Lebanon, until such time as Ethiopian students in North Africa and the Middle East set up a regional union. These recommendations were endorsed by the 12th ESUE Congress and the subsequent ESUNA Congress (*ibid.*). The executive committee of ESUE was mandated to call a meeting to reconstitute WWUES.

According to the proponents of WWFES, it was the ineffective record of WWUES that prompted the drive to set up the new world-wide organization in April 1973. The *Challenge* retrospective analysis cited above identified four fundamental structural weaknesses of WWUES: the absence of clear delineation of powers and duties between it and its constituent parts, the world-wide organization's lack of corporate identity, the irregularity of its congresses, and the weakness of its secretariat. The founding congress of the WWFES, which was expected to rectify these deficiencies, took place in the city of West Berlin from 21 to 28 April, 1973. Delegates from ESUE, ESUNA, Lebanon and the WWEWSG attended the week-long meeting, with delegates from the student unions in Algeria and the Sudan joining two and three days later, respectively. In addition, there were representatives of ESUE branches in Benelux,⁴ Britain, France, Germany, Norway and Switzerland. What was ostensibly planned to be a routine meeting on organizational affairs soon came to be bogged down in a debate on the nature and character of the student movement, the ESUE leadership accusing USUAA and ESUNA of manifesting left-adventurist and focoist tendencies and representatives of ESUE chapters taking exception to the stand of the ESUE leadership (*Challenge*, XIII: 1).

Even more acrimonious divisions emerged around the credentials of the leader of the Ethiopian Students Union in Lebanon, Tesfaye Taddese, who claimed to represent all the student unions in North Africa and the Middle East, including, in addition to his Lebanese constituency, Algeria, the Sudan, Egypt and Iraq. He based his claim on a mandate that the 12th ESUE Congress had apparently given him to organize this regional union. While his claim was supported by the ESUE leadership, it was opposed by ESUNA and WWEWSG, as

⁴ A compound name for Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg.

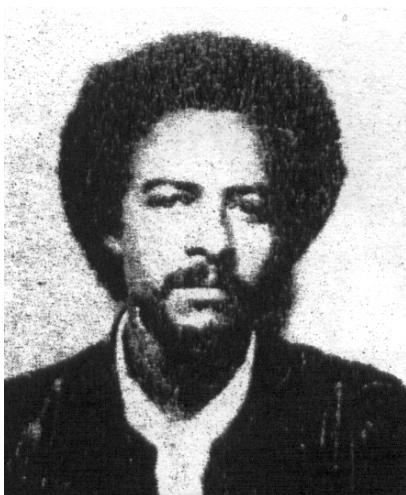
well as by the student union in the Sudan in a letter that it had sent to the congress. In the end, it was agreed that the different unions in North Africa and the Middle East (Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon and Sudan) should be admitted individually rather than being represented by a regional umbrella organization. It was after these procedural issues were finally resolved⁵ in one form or another that the Congress turned its attention to the main item on the agenda, i.e. discussion of the draft WWFES constitution, forcing an extension of the original schedule by three more days (*ibid.*). As meetings often continued until after midnight, the number of days do not actually give an accurate picture of the length of time (as recalled by Yeraswork Admassie, secretary-general of ESUE at the time: see Bahru 2010: 60–61).

Against such a background of mistrust and acrimony, it was very unlikely that a consensus would be reached. The discussion of the WWFES constitution, which apparently was drafted by the ESUNA group, proved no less contentious. The main sticking point was the article which gave the prerogative of external relations to the WWFES. ESUE and Lebanon strenuously objected to this as a curtailment of the fundamental rights of continental unions or even their branches (Bahru 2010: 61). Eventually, the matter had to be put to the vote, and the proponents of WWFES carried the day by a two-thirds majority. ESUE and ESUL (Ethiopian Students Union in Lebanon) withdrew from the organization, refusing to join even provisionally until they got approval from their next congresses. According to the ESUNA report, the ESUE representatives were initially inclined to consider this compromise but reversed their decision ‘after a certain E.S.U.E. veteran expressed contrary opinions’ (*Challenge*, XIII: 1). Yeraswork recalls a poignant moment in the course of the tempestuous proceedings when, during one of the recesses, the two leaders of the opposing factions (and ultimately of the two leftist parties, EPRP and *Ma’ison*), Berhane Meskel Redda and Haile Fida, were seen arguing passionately. Haile later confided that they were holding each other accountable for the fateful split within the student movement that was becoming so manifest (Bahru 2010: 61–62). The congress was concluded with the election of the following officers of the newly constituted WWFES:

Abebech Bekele (WWEWSG)
Eyasu Alemayehu (Algeria)
Yohannes Kifle (ESUE-Switzerland)
Melaku Tegegne (ESUE-Benelux)
Ayele Bekele (ESUNA)

President
Secretary, Foreign Affairs
Secretary, Student Welfare
Secretary, Publications
Secretary, Finance

⁵ The resolution was only temporary for, as the ESUE ‘observer’ cited below showed, it actually put the ESUE leadership at a disadvantage when it came to the final vote, as the votes of representatives of individual unions like Algeria and Sudan, who were pro-WWFES, could have equal value with those of continental groupings like ESUE and ESUNA.



11. Berhane Meskel Redda
(Alef 3, 1, 1986 EC)



12. Haile Fida
(Courtesy of Getie Gelaye, Hamburg University)

The dramatic proceedings of the founding congress of WWFES had their sequel three months later at the 13th ESUE Congress in Hannover. The ESUE leadership prepared for that Congress thoroughly, sending emissaries to the various branch unions to apprise them of the threat that WWFES presented to the democratic traditions of student organizations. It approached the Congress with single-minded determination to admonish its rebellious chapters (i.e. those who had sided with the proponents of WWFES at the Berlin Congress) and to reverse the decision of the Berlin Congress. It succeeded in both. The *Sane* 1965 (June 1973) issue of *Teglachen* was dedicated to a report by an 'observer' of the WWFES founding congress in Berlin two months earlier. The 'observer' used the pseudonym of Asrat Girma and was clearly someone who was within the inner circles of the ESUE leadership. He gave a detailed account of the proceedings of the congress, caricaturing the positions of the partisans of WWFES. While it dwelt on the differences that arose over the constitution of the new organization, it is evident from the concluding pages that the issue was essentially one of the divergent political stands that the two parties have increasingly come to adopt over the role of student unions and the timeliness or otherwise of waging armed struggle. Thus, it highlighted the 'coordinated campaign' conducted against the ESUE line by those partisans, accusing them of their eagerness to wage armed struggle (*Teglachen*, *Sane* 1965/June 1973).

Preceding issues of *Teglachen* (January–February and March) had also carried two successive feature articles entitled 'Yamahbarat Cheger' ('Problems of Student Unions'). These issues were clear indication of the divisions that were to manifest themselves openly at

the founding congress of WWFES. The first issue was written by the Algerian group and had apparently been circulated but not presented at the 12th ESUE Congress held in Antony (France) in 1972.⁶ It dwelt at length on what it called feudalistic attitudes or Byzantine politics prevalent within student unions. As manifestation of these attitudes, it singled out for special critique the ESUNA bimonthly published by Sennay Lekke, the president of the organization in 1970/71, and the conduct of the ESUE president at the time, Elehu Feleke, on the question of the fake issue of *Challenge* that had been published earlier and had created a big controversy between him and the editor of *Challenge*, Melesse Ayalew. They objected strongly to Sennay's identification with them of the pseudonym Tilahun Takele (author of the treatise on the national question), arguing that they obviously used a pseudonym precisely because they did not wish to be identified, and his publication of a private letter suggesting the formation of a secret political organization. The group also pointed to slanderous rumours circulating about the Tigrean origin of most members of the Algerian group and their affluent life style (including living in a big villa). It also pointed out the centrality of the national question in the ideological struggle that was going on within the student movement (*Teglachen*, *Ter-Yakatit* 1965/January–February 1973).

The next issue of *Teglachen* carried a response to the Algerian group's paper by a Bekele Wodaje, no doubt an ESUE insider. The author rejected the Algerian group's contention that the divisions that had emerged in the student movement, particularly in ESUNA, emanated from differences on the national question. These divisions had already become apparent, particularly in the New York Chapter, as the newcomers from Ethiopia found the sedate approach of ESUNA veterans to revolutionary struggle unpalatable. Tilahun Takele's treatise only provided them with the last ammunition with which to destroy the veterans. That treatise itself is subjected to severe critique for its blind imitation of Leninist rhetoric, its accent on the right of secession and the fact that its avowed purpose was not so much to engage the authors of the papers for the 17th ESUNA Congress in honest debate as to destroy them out and out. As for the group's allegations of the prevalence of feudal intrigue within the student movement, the author argued that it itself was far from immune from that vice, as could be seen from the way it highlighted the issue of the fake *Challenge* to embarrass the ESUE president and to exacerbate the divisions between the ESUE and ESUNA leaderships. The last part of the article was devoted to a rebuttal of the group's assertion of control of the ESUE leadership by a clique and a spirited defence of the record of the union in educating its membership and fostering a culture of democracy (*Teglachen*, *Magabit* 1965/March 1973).

As at the Berlin Congress, the Hannover Congress was preceded by

⁶ It actually came out in the name of an organization described as Ethiopian Students' Democratic Revolutionary Union. The version in this particular issue of *Teglachen* has only the second part of the document.

a debate on the role and nature of the student movement. This was said to be not entirely unrelated to the organizational issue at hand, as perceptions of the role of the student movement had implications for the kind of student organization preferred. With that as a backdrop, the executive committees of the branch unions of Benelux, Switzerland and the Soviet Union were chastised for their 'anti-democratic, anti-organizational acts and for their co-ordinated campaign against the executive committee of ESUE'. The Congress also voted to reject the WWFES as 'incompatible with the broad democratic objectives of the student movement and mandated the incoming executive committee of ESUE to work with WWFES and other Ethiopian student organizations to consult on ways of setting up an all-embracing world-wide organization'. The motion passed by fifty-seven votes, with five voting against; thirty-eight people abstained, saying that the motion was illegal (ESUE brief report on 13th Congress).

In retrospect, the differences over the WWFES constitution were not of such magnitude as to entail its entire rejection and the fateful split that followed. The debate focused mainly on the clause that stated that foreign relations will be the *sole* prerogative of WWFES; the culprit Amharic word was *becha* ('sole'). The ESUE leadership harped on this word, saying that it encroached on the rights of regional and branch unions. There was even some controversy about the existence of that word, one pro-Federation branch union leader, presumably relying on an edited version of the constitution, having accused the ESUE leadership of having inserted it 'à la Goebbels'. The ESUE leadership alleged that the newly elected WWFES president had deleted the contentious word from the version that had been submitted to the congress for discussion, thereby accusing the other party not only of hegemonic aspirations but also of duplicity.

A close look at the stamped version of the WWFES constitution adopted in Berlin shows that the contentious word *becha* appears to have been not deleted but inserted in Article 8 as a sort of afterthought. Interviewed on the matter, the person at the centre of the controversy did not seem to recall the controversy at all. What she remembered was the strong belief of those who drafted the constitution for adopting a federal structure for the organization. Article 9 of the constitution clearly stipulated that WWFES would consult member unions before taking a stand on Ethiopian political organizations and national affairs. Likewise, Article 10, while it empowers WWFES to give guidelines to journals of member unions and to ensure that they follow the WWFES political line, states that such powers would not include censoring or rejecting articles before their publication (copy deposited at US Library of Congress).

That these differences could have been accommodated, had there been the will, was shown by the efforts of the Soviet Union branch union and a group in Berlin to amend the WWFES constitution so that it would be acceptable to both contending parties. The former, at

its 10th annual Congress, recommended the adoption of the WWFES constitution with amendments to the clauses that gave total control of foreign relations and the production of the journals to the world-wide body (Bahru 2010: 144–5). Similarly, even after the 13th ESUE Congress, efforts within the Berlin sub-unit of the German branch of ESUE to revise the constitution so that it would be acceptable to both parties came to naught, as the leadership of the German union was not receptive of the idea. In the end, seven concerned individuals issued a manifesto in March 1974 expressing their dismay at the acrimonious divisions that had been unfolding around the issue of WWFES and the injurious effect these divisions were exerting on the common struggle. The group hailed the efforts of the Soviet Union branch as a promising point of departure. It attached to the manifesto an article-by-article commentary on the WWFES constitution. With regard to the controversial article on foreign relations, it rephrased it in such a way as to retain the sole prerogative of the World Wide Federation to conduct foreign relations on the broad objectives of the anti-feudal and anti-imperialist struggle and the welfare of the students, while reserving the right of member unions to conduct such foreign relations on matters affecting them and on mandate from the WWFES (Berlin Group Manifesto, 18.3.74).

The Hannover Congress was followed by some caustic exchanges between ESUE and WWFES. We do not have the records on the WWFES side. But the first salvo in this highly acrimonious correspondence was a letter from the ESUE executive committee dated 7 October 1973, i.e. some two months after the Hannover Congress. Addressed to ESUNA, WUEWSG and various unions in Africa and the Middle East, the letter expressed the readiness of the ESUE executive committee to host a meeting to discuss ‘ways of setting up an all-embracing’ world-wide organization, as per the mandate given it at the Hannover Congress (Letter of 7.10.73). This provoked a response from WWFES challenging the legality of the Hannover decision to reject the WWFES constitution as the decision was not approved by a two-thirds majority. ESUE countered that it was acceptance of the WWFES constitution that would have required a two-thirds majority as it would have been tantamount to changing the ESUE constitution; rejecting it on the grounds that it was inconsistent with the ESUE constitution was a matter of opinion and could therefore pass with a simple majority (Letter of 24.11.73). To a call from WWFES on 30 November 1973 for another meeting to resolve the differences around WWFES, ESUE replied that it would be happy to attend such a meeting but only as ‘an observer’ as the WWFES constitution had been rejected by the Hannover Congress (Letter of 20.12.73). The accusations and counter-accusations continued, WWFES accusing ESUE of trying to set up a rival world-wide organization and ESUE in turn accusing WWFES of dilly-dallying on organizing the impending meeting for nearly eight months. In a tone reminiscent of the Berhane Meskel-Haile Fida exchanges of April 1973, ESUE went

on to warn that አጥብቀን ልናሳውቃችሁ የምንፈልገው፣ በዚህ በፌዴሬሽን ጉዳይ ላይ ወደፊት ለሚነሱት ማናቸውም ችግሮች ሁሉ ተጠያቂዎች እናንተው መሆናችሁን ካሁኑ እንድትገነዘቡት ነው፡፡ ('We would like to inform you that you should realize that you would be solely responsible for all the problems that would arise in the future from this issue of the Federation') (Letter of 23.7.74).

By this time, these acerbic exchanges had been overshadowed by developments inside Ethiopia with the eruption of the popular revolution in February 1974. New differences emerged – or old differences were reinforced – on the nature and direction of the revolution. These differences starkly came out into the open at the 14th ESUE Congress held at an annex to the historic Olympic Stadium in West Berlin on 13–19 August 1974.⁷ Over two hundred delegates from fourteen countries attended the congress. The on-going struggle between ESUE and WWFES became apparent even before the formal opening of the congress when the 3rd general meeting of the Ethiopian Women Students in Europe Study Group was convened. The meeting condemned its executive committee, which had continued in membership of WWFES despite the fact that no decision had been made at the Hannover meeting a year earlier to join WWFES. The meeting went on to rule that, pending a thorough discussion of the issues involved, the group will not be a member of WWFES and will not attend the meeting called for September 1974. That the process of fission had intensified also became apparent at the formal reading of solidarity messages, when two rival organizations from Iraq and the Sudan were represented (ESUE report on 14th Congress, September 1974: 1–6).

These were the dress rehearsals for the fundamental clash of positions that unfolded in the following days. An intense debate raged, first in the commissions and then in the plenary, on the nature of the Ethiopian revolution that was unfolding. The two major issues of contention were: the leadership of the revolution and the question of a provisional popular government. On the first issue, the Federation side (or EPRP, as it subsequently transpired) argued that the popular upsurge was led by what it broadly defined as the 'proletariat', including in the nomenclature not only the industrial working class but also the oppressed soldiers and teachers. The ESUE (or *Ma'ison*) side argued that it was the petit bourgeoisie that led the upsurge. On the second issue, the first side called for the setting up of a provisional popular government composed of the various popular committees that had mushroomed in the course of the popular upsurge, as an intermediate stage to the establishment of a people's government. The second side argued that no 'popular' government can be set up without the dismantling of feudalism and imperialism; the task of revolutionaries is therefore to mobilize and organize the masses, not to struggle for a provisional popular government. The final political resolution passed by the congress (with

⁷ The meeting was held in a hall a few meters away from the stadium, while delegates slept in the quarters inside (OI Yilma Haile Michael).



13. Venue of 14th ESUE Congress

(Photo © Bahru Zewde)

eighty-six votes for and seventy-five against), asserting the leadership role of the *petit bourgeoisie* in the popular upsurge and emphasizing the primacy of agitational and organizational work among the oppressed masses, clearly represented a victory for the *Ma'ison* line (*ibid.*: 8–27).

The 14th ESUE Congress ultimately proved the beginning of the parting of ways for the two contending sides, as indeed for the two underground parties, EPRP and *Ma'ison*, who were controlling the show from behind. That it was agreed that both positions should be published in the ESUE journal as majority and minority positions did not avert the final split. The Congress ultimately proved to be the last one that both parties attended together. The 15th Congress in 1975 in effect became two separate congresses, leading to the emergence of two ESUEs, creating the kind of confusion that had ensued following the ESUNA split in 1971.

The deposing of the emperor on 12 September 1974 and the assumption of power by the Darg – rechristened the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) – only tended to exacerbate the situation, as the two sides had to articulate their respective positions vis-à-vis the new regime. The debate around the provisional popular government (or PPG, as it came to be known in its famous acronym) in effect concealed a jockeying for position in the new alignment of forces that was unfolding. The Federation/EPRP side, apparently confident of its influence within the popular committees (or soviets, as they were hyperbolically called) that had emerged in the course of the upsurge, pushed for PPG as a sure way of ensuring its hegemony. The ESUE/*Ma'ison* side was averse to the PPG idea precisely for the same reason. Hence, it was prepared to view the Darg with some degree of indulgence.

244 An incident soon after the deposing of the emperor aggravated the

tension between the two factions within ESUE and helped the Federation side to win over some branches of ESUE, such as that of the UK, which had remained largely non-committal until then. This was the sending of a telegram to the Darg expressing joy at the event. The Federation side saw no reason why a telegram had to be sent to the Darg when the event was the outcome of the struggle of all popular forces since February 1974 and when, on the very same day, the Darg issued a proclamation banning all demonstrations, strikes and any form of opposition to its nebulous slogan of *Ityopya Teqdam* ('Ethiopia First'). It went even further and interpreted the act as a tacit recognition of the PMAC as a legitimate authority and a way of ingratiating itself with it.

Less than a month after the 14th ESUE Congress, on 1–8 September 1974, the much-heralded 2nd WWFES Congress took place in the same city of West Berlin, venue of so many momentous meetings of the student movement and the Left. Delegations from USUAA, ESUNA, ESUE, WUEWSG, and from student organizations in Algeria, the Sudan, Egypt and various branch unions of ESUE, attended the week-long meeting. The meeting was preceded by a photo exhibition of highlights of the student movement and a cultural show. No sooner was the Congress formally opened before it came to be dominated by controversy around the personality of Tesfaye Taddese. Indeed, the first order of business proved to be his expulsion from the Congress, 'pursuant to the decision of the presidential council and the demands of member organizations'. The saga did not end there. After the presentation of the WWFES secretariat report in the morning of 2 September, the afternoon and the following day was dominated by discussion of the same personality, who was declared a spy 'of the CIA and other intelligence organizations' by all present except the ESUE leadership, which asked proof of the allegation. The meeting was concluded with the condemnation of the person for his spying and divisive activities and censured the ESUE leadership for working closely with him since the 12th ESUE Congress, i.e. 1972 (WWFES brief report on 2nd Congress, September 1974).

There are few persons who became such centres of controversy as Tesfaye Taddese. Those who considered him suspect traced his history to his relationship while still in Addis Ababa with an American woman called Mara Larsen, who was suspected of being a CIA operative. Following the 1969 exodus, he went first to the Sudan and immediately moved on to Lebanon, where he set up a student organization. It is not clear when and how his contradictions with other branch unions in the region, notably the ones in Algeria and the Sudan, emerged. But it appears that, once these contradictions became evident, the ESUE leadership saw in him a welcome counterweight to the hegemonic position that the Algerian group was attaining in the region. The fact that the 12th ESUE Congress, in its mandate to the executive committee to reconstitute the WWUES on a new basis, recognized the Ethiopian

Students Union in Lebanon as one of the constituent units was evidence of the budding relationship between the two parties. The level of acrimony that had come to surround him is evident as early as the report on the founding congress of WWFES published in *Challenge* in August 1973, which continuously refers to him as 'one Tesfaye Tadesse'. At the 14th ESUE Congress, discussion of the executive committee annual report had been dominated by its censure of the WWFES officials for their accusations through various publications and correspondence that ESUE and Tesfaye had tried to divide students in the Middle East and North Africa. Tesfaye himself had made a passionate appeal to the meeting that his accusers either substantiate their allegations about his spying and divisive activities or be condemned for their 'slandorous' attacks (ESUE report on 14th Congress: 20–22).

Be that as it may, his expulsion from the 2nd WWFES Congress was a clear signal, if any were needed, that the ESUE-WWFES divisions were not going to heal. The only change from the 14th ESUE Congress was that the majority and minority positions were reversed, ESUE now finding itself in the latter position. Accordingly, it dissociated itself from the political resolution that was adopted at the end of the inevitable debate on the Ethiopian revolution that preceded the organizational question. The resolution reflected the WWFES position of the leadership role of the proletariat during the revolutionary upsurge and the validity of the PPG slogan. On the issue of the WWFES constitution, amendments were submitted by the delegations from ESUNA, Algeria, and the Sudan, although what exactly those amendments were is not indicated in the report. ESUE once again deferred its membership pending approval by its 15th congress due in the summer of 1975. Against protests from ESUE, which refused to recognize the student union in the Sudan,⁸ the regional union for Middle East and North Africa (comprising of the unions in Algeria, Cairo and the Sudan) was accepted as a member of WWFES (WWFES brief report on 2nd Congress).

There was little meaningful communication between the two parties after the 2nd WWFES Congress. Instead, both sides resorted to accusations and name-calling of the lowest order. The WWFES publications secretariat, based in Amsterdam, had begun to bring out a bulletin bearing the organization's name as well as two other bi-lingual bulletins, *Struggle* (ታገል) and ህብ ሕደሩ ('The Proletariat'). Interspersed with various national and international news items and articles on various aspects of the struggle were polemical exchanges with the other party, which often reciprocated in equal measure. Sometimes, entire special issues of ESUE journals or Federation bulletins were dedi-

⁸ Presumably, it was reserving its recognition for the other faction in the Sudan. After Algeria, Sudan had become a major centre of students who had fled the country following the repression of 1969; indeed numerically speaking, it was much more important than Algeria. While some managed to move further to Europe and North America, the majority remained there. Initially at least, their views were sympathetic to those based in Algeria, as well as the new force that appeared in ESUNA after 1969.

cated to denouncing the views and positions of the other party. These exchanges between the two parties grew progressively acerbic and contributed to the polarization that was to have fateful consequences as the revolutionary struggle unfolded at home.

Looking back at the WWFES publications in particular, one is struck by the industry and enthusiasm that went into the production of such a wide range of publications. They all bore a stamp of urgency about them, something that probably explains their almost irreverent disregard for form, including an inordinate amount of typographical errors and sometimes even lack of dating or serial numbering. It was as if, in the heat of the struggle, the writers/editors could not bother about the niceties of language and form. This contrasted with the highly ordered and sedate nature of the ESUE publications, particularly before the split. These characteristics were to be the hallmarks of the two leftist organizations that sprouted from the student movement: combative energy versus cool calculation, revolutionary fervour versus political manoeuvring. It is interesting how the WWFES/EPRP side were often drawn into defending untenable positions by what appeared to be calculated provocations from the other side. A good example is the debate around the fascist nature of the Darg that dominated the discourse in the early years of the revolution. It started with the WWFES/EPRP side labelling the repressive acts of the Darg as *fascistic*, in much the same way as student unions, including ESUE, had described even the Haile Selassie regime as fascist. The ESUE/*Ma'ison* side countered whether the regime could be described as *fascist*. The other side then plunged into a far from convincing theoretical odyssey on the applicability of the fascist label to the Darg.

The final act of this saga of fusion and fission in the Ethiopian student movement took place in North America with the creation in 1975 of a new splinter organization. Thankfully, it spared historians further confusion by not calling itself ESUNA, which would have made it the third organization to go by that name. Rather, it assumed a slightly modified name: United Progressive Ethiopian Students' Union in North America (UPESUNA). From the background history that yet another offshoot of the organization presented in 1979, this was set up in opposition to the ESUNA/WWFES side 'on a broad platform of opposition to the imperialist enemy plot of disintegrating the motherland'. Its position on the national question, recognizing the right of nations to self-determination but making the exercise of that right conditional on the progressive character of the leadership, was akin to that of the old ESUNA. It advocated 'critical support' of the Darg, in much the same way as *Ma'ison* was to do after 1975, and supported the united front of the five Marxist-Leninist organizations (*Imaledeh* in its Amharic acronym) as a stepping stone for the formation of a genuine Marxist-Leninist party.

What gives the story of UPESUNA an interesting twist is the emergence of yet another break-away faction calling itself UPESUNA-

Bolshevik, apparently after the exit of *Ma'ison* from the front in 1977 and its shift to a new strategy of opposition to the Darg. UPESUNA-Bolshevik took an unabashedly pro-Darg line, celebrating almost all the measures that were taken by the Darg and sending a 'courageous delegation' to visit the country and report on the progress registered (Background History, n.d.). According to an undated communiqué released by UPESUNA-Bolshevik, a similar split appears to have occurred within the pro-*Ma'ison* ESUE as well, leading to the formation of the *Revolutionary Ethiopian Students' Union in Europe* (RESUE). The communiqué hailed what it called 'the historic declaration of unity for struggle' by the two splinter unions. Interestingly, it described this common declaration as 'a devastating blow to the machinations of the enemies of the Ethiopian people who for their own selfish motives, in order to effectively control it, have split and counter-split the students' movement'. The two partners were also gearing themselves up for the creation of 'a genuine workers' party' with their formation of a 'party preparatory commission (PPC)' (undated UPESUNA-Bolshevik communiqué).

The ESUE-WWFES duel had another splintering effect in North Africa and the Middle East. As noted above, the region (as it had come to be considered, although it combined two different regions) had no union at the time of the formation of WWFES. Instead, three national unions were represented at that meeting – Algeria, Lebanon and the Sudan – even if the leader of the second tried to present himself as a regional representative, claiming that he had an ESUE mandate to set up the regional union. In the final decision, Algeria and the Sudan stood for the newly constituted WWFES while ESUE and Lebanon stood against.⁹ Thereafter, both parties turned their attention to forming a regional union sympathetic to their position. WWFES set up what came to be known as the Ethiopian Students Union in North Africa and the Middle East while ESUE and Tesfaye Taddese came up with a rival organization known as the Ethiopian Students Union in Africa and the Middle East. Apart from the differing African scope of the two organizations (North Africa vs. Africa as a whole), the two rival organizations significantly excluded Lebanon and Algeria, respectively; needless to say, these two latter countries were the linchpins of the two competing organizations. The Sudan union was split into two, with each faction affiliated to one or other of the rival regional unions.

We have record of the formation of the WWFES-sponsored regional organization, formally known as the Regional Union of Ethiopian Students in the Middle East and North Africa (RUESMENA), in Cairo on 28 April – 2 May 1974 in the form of a report submitted by the WWFES Foreign Relations Secretary, Eyasu Alemayehu. The report highlights

⁹ According to one student in the Sudan at the time, the Sudan representative, the former USUAA president Tariku Debre Tsion, had been sent by two factions of the already splitting student body in the Sudan to observe and was not mandated to vote. The WWFES report cited below, however, denies there was any division, claiming that the pro-WWFES faction had 23 members in Khartoum alone, whereas the other faction had only three members (WWFES n.d.: 7).

the difficulties encountered in setting up the organization, blaming the 'trinity' of Tesfaye Taddese, leaders of ESUE and the representatives of the Ethiopian National Liberation Front (ENLF). From a report that was presented at the founding congress, there was no doubt that Tesfaye was considered the main culprit. His catalogue of sins included a long history of divisive activities, including his opposition to USUAA as a member of the Restoration Committee, financial embezzlement, collusion with CIA agents, and setting up a government-sponsored association to counter the Oromo Mecha-Tulama Association. ESUE leaders had also allegedly stationed their own man in the Sudan to divide the students there. The meeting was attended by three delegates from Cairo and two each from Algeria and the Sudan. A fracas developed some ten minutes before its opening when Tesfaye and another student from the Sudan tried to enter the meeting hall and were prevented from doing so. The meeting was concluded with the election of officers – Cairo taking the presidium, Sudan the secretariat and Algeria the publications – and the decision to formally affiliate with WWFES. The meeting also passed resolutions on the on-going revolutionary process as well as the famine in Ethiopia, in addition to condemning Tesfaye Taddese and ENLF and expressing solidarity with the struggle of the Eritrean people for self-determination (undated WWFES report).

MA'ISON AND EPRP

As already suggested, all the above jostling and tussling was in actual fact the outward manifestation of the subterranean struggle for hegemony between the two leftist organizations that had started operating clandestinely. But, while the leaders knew what they were doing, the rank and file remained blissfully unaware of the real issue and fought for their respective cause with a fanaticism that must have left the leaders as amused as they were gratified. Indeed, oftentimes, the animosity was more pronounced amongst the followers than amongst the leaders, who were often seen talking amiably after the heated debates. For many, the issue was one of being for or against the 'Federation'. The unwritten ban on political parties in Ethiopia fostered this culture of clandestinity.

The two leftist parties did not apparently constitute the first attempt to form a political organization. Andargachew speculates that the first political organization, known as the Ethiopian People's Council, was set up by three adherents of the abortive 1960 coup – Alem Mezgebe, Getachaw Garedew and Kebede Tesemma – who had all fled to Somalia subsequent to the failure of the coup (Andargachew 2000: 9). A circular sent by ESANA in February 1966 also alludes to the Ethiopian People Movement Organization (*Yalenyopya Hezb Neqnaqe Derejet*), one of whose leaders, Kebede Tesfaye, was killed by unidentified agents in Khartoum. The names of both the victim and the organization are so

similar to one of the founders of the Ethiopian People's Council cited above that it is tempting to suspect that this may very well be a case of distortion. At any rate, Kebede's mutilated body was reportedly found in the outskirts of Khartoum. The circular drew parallels with similar assaults in Germany by the Iranian intelligence unit Savak on three Iranian students opposed to the regime and the kidnapping and death of the Moroccan opposition leader Ben Barka. Pointing an accusing finger at the Ethiopian regime, and suggesting the active collaboration of the Sudanese one, it stressed that it was both the right and duty of all Ethiopians to call for a thorough investigation of Kebede's killing. To this end, ESANA members were encouraged to follow the cue provided by ESUE and demonstrate in front of the Sudanese Embassy in Washington DC (ESANA circular, 20 *Yakatit* 1958/27 February 1966).

Within the student movement, the idea of forming a political organization appeared to have first been mooted among members of ESANA with the presentation at the Association's 15th Congress in 1965 of what came to be known as the 'Utah Paper'. According to a 'postscript' by Andreas Eshete, the paper was drafted by a group of students who happened to meet at Salt Lake City that summer. The paper called for the formation of a political party drawn both from students and non-students and with its headquarters not abroad but inside the country. It was unanimously endorsed by the congress, which went on to elect an *ad hoc* committee to look into the implementation of the plan. In a letter dated 12 September, the ESANA president, Hagos Gebre Yesus, 'applauded warmly' the group that had drafted the proposal and expressed his hope that the idea 'will be vigorously pursued by all Ethiopians who take to heart all the needs and aspirations of our people' (IES CL 2395/03/1.3).¹⁰ A permanent committee that was subsequently set up was expected to draft the party's charter and present it at the next ESANA Congress in 1966. The postscript enjoined all participants to the forthcoming congress to give the paper serious attention (*Challenge*, VI: 1, 74-5). The first ESANA Newsletter of November 1966 carried what looked like an elaboration of the idea first mooted in the summer of 1965. Specifically, it featured a declaration appreciating the country's rich cultural heritage and long history of independence yet bemoaning its lack of progress and, with a view to building an Ethiopia of equal opportunity for all, proposing the establishment of an Ethiopian Nationalist Political Organization, which was to form the nucleus of a 'united front' known as the National Progressive Forces of Ethiopia (NPFE).

The more enduring initiative in this direction was taken by the leaders of ESUE. Although the idea of forming a political organization was first aired at the 4th and 5th ESUE Congresses (1964 and 1965, respectively), the first meaningful meeting to that end took place at the historic Parisian suburb of Rambouillet in April 1967. That meeting approved the draft constitution of the political organization

¹⁰ The letter was addressed to 'Fellow Ethiopians', c/o Bekele Teguegne, who was apparently one of the moving spirits behind the initiative.

that was eventually to evolve as *Ma'ison* and designated one of the ESUE veterans, Worku Ferede, to be coordinator. A foretaste of future trends, i.e. clandestine political organizations manipulating the student movement from behind, was the role that this clandestine group played in directing the course of the next ESUE congress at Montargue. A meeting of the organization was held in December after the founding congress of WWUES, which most of the eleven founding members of *Ma'ison* happened to be attending. The meeting was conducted with considerable haste and secrecy to elude the attention of other participants of the Congress, including some leaders of the Ethiopian People's Council (Andargachew 2000: 10–11).

These early preparations culminated in the first general meeting of the steering group on 16 April 1968 at the city of Malmö in Sweden. The meeting elected twenty-five founding members of *Ma'ison* on the basis of their participation in the student movement, their espousal of Marxist-Leninist ideology and their personal character. The founding congress of the organization was held in the northern German city of Hamburg on 1–6 August 1968. With the exception of Hagos Gebre Yesus and Melesse Ayalew, who were leaders of ESUNA, all the other founding members were from ESUE. Other members of the ESUNA leadership – Alem Habtu, Andreas Eshete, Dessalegn Rahmato, Haile Menkerios, Henock Kifle and Tamrat Kebede – were also inducted into the organization (*ibid.*: 14–15). But, according to both Alem and Tamrat, some of them were completely unaware of their membership, their names apparently having been given by Hagos, who also apparently withdrew their names when he disassociated himself from the organization following the subsequent divergence of views (Bahru 2010: 80–81; OR: 126).

The creation of *Ma'ison* was one of the most closely guarded secrets in the Ethiopian student movement, something that may well have contributed to the acrimonious divisions that later developed. The damage that this veil of secrecy did to the organization itself is described in some detail in Andargachew's history of the organization. Not only did it confine the organization to the student movement, but it also deprived it of forging the much-needed links with national and international organizations. Even more importantly, it left it completely unprepared when the Ethiopian revolution erupted in February 1974 (Andargachew 2000: 123). It was only recently revealed that some of its members based in Addis Ababa were involved in the 1969 student agitation and that at least three of them were in fact sentenced to terms of imprisonment. These were Worku Ferede, who was the leading spirit in the steering committee that set up the organization, and two ex-ESUNA members, Henock Kifle and Tamrat Kebede. Dr Hanna Gobeze, sister of another founding member of *Ma'ison*, Negede Gobeze, was also implicated. Henock, Tamrat and Worku were charged with creating contacts with external organizations and channelling funds to the students who were producing anti-government pamphlets and Hanna with sheltering

the duplicating machine. They were subsequently sentenced to seven years' imprisonment, but they were pardoned a few months later along with the other students who had been sentenced for shorter periods (Andargachew 2000: 31–34; Bahru 2010: 80–81). Yet, not even some of the defendants, particularly Henock and Tamrat, knew whether they were acting as ESUNA activists or *Ma'ison* members.

Interestingly enough, in an apparent move to penetrate the student movement, the founders of *Ma'ison* did air their new organization, albeit cautiously, at the next ESUE Congress in Zagreb (summer of 1968). The resolutions of that Congress included an announcement of the establishment of a committee known rather clumsily as the 'BaAwropa YaItiyopya Tamariwoch YaHebretasab Itiyopya Neqnaqe Committee' (The Socialist Ethiopia Movement Committee of Ethiopian Students in Europe). This development, according to the resolution, marked the third stage in the evolution of the Ethiopian student movement, the launch of organized struggle to bring about people's government; the first stage represented the reformist phase and the second the revolutionary one. Although it was stated that committees of the organization had already been established in the various branches, the authors of the resolution deemed it essential to issue the following disclaimer:

ምንም እንኳን ስለዚህ ኮሚቴ መቋቋም አንዳንድ የተሳሳቱ አስተያየቶች ቢሰነዘሩ - ለምሳሌ የፖለቲካ ቡድን ነው ማለት፤ ወይም በስደት የቆመ መንግሥት ማለትና እነዚህን የመሳሰሉ ነገሮች - ኮሚቴዎች በብዙ ቅርንጫፍ ማሕበራት ተቋቁመው በዓመቱ ውስጥ ሥራቸውን ሲያካሂዱ ቆይተዋል፡፡ (IES CL 2395/01/3.1)

Although there have been some erroneous views about the establishment of this committee – such as that it is a political organization, a government-in-exile, etc. – committees have been set up in many branch unions and have been busy through the year.

This same cult of secrecy prevailed even after a number of student activists fled the country, partly to escape the increasingly repressive atmosphere, and partly in search of the political organization that they felt must have been established outside by then. Only in their dealings with the Algerian group could the leaders of *Ma'ison* not hide for long the existence of the organization. According to Andargachew, the home branch of *Ma'ison* was aware of the hijack plan in the summer of 1969 and even gave the initiating group its support. One of the *Ma'ison* leaders, Kebbede Mengesha, even visited the hijackers whilst still in the Sudan, bringing them some money. After they moved to Algeria, there were a few exchanges between the group and the leaders of *Ma'ison*, specifically Haile Fida, who reportedly advised them on how to deal with the Algerian government, urging them to express their desire to enroll in a university rather than declaring their eagerness to obtain military training in order to overthrow the Ethiopian government (Andargachew 2000: 59–61).

252 The first serious discussions between *Ma'ison* and the Algerian

group apparently started in March 1970, when Haile visited the group in Algiers. But he had strict instructions not to reveal the identity of *Ma'ison* until he reached full agreement with the group on the organizational and programmatic issues to be discussed. So, at this stage, they discussed the question of forming a political organization in general terms, not on whether the group would join *Ma'ison* or not. The two sides agreed that the Algerian group should accept the offer of the Algerian government to enrol them in the Algerian military academy, while the Haile group would concentrate on political and organizational work. It was also agreed that the Algerian group would henceforth conduct all their foreign relations through the yet undeclared *Ma'ison*. Although there is no indication of whether Haile had revealed the identity of *Ma'ison* to the Algerian group, in his report to the party committee, he recommended that the organization accept them into its membership as a group. There was heated discussion in the *Ma'ison* leadership around this recommendation, particularly on the issue of group membership. It was finally resolved to accept them as a group, with only one of those present objecting (*ibid.*: 59–64).¹¹

Haile's second visit to Algiers, presumably with news of the acceptance of the Algerian group into *Ma'ison*, proved less cordial. By this time, two of the seven members of the Algerian group had expressed strong reservations about the *Ma'ison* stand on the national question, which they saw indistinguishable from the one adopted at the 17th ESUNA Congress in 1969. Conversely, the highly polemical tract on the national question written by Tilahun Takele, a pseudonym adopted by the Algerian group, was also unacceptable to *Ma'ison*, which urged the group to tone down the polemics. But it was published unchanged by the New York Chapter of ESUNA in March 1971. Further disagreements arose over the offers that *Ma'ison* had managed to secure for military training in China, when the Algerian group reportedly insisted that it take part as a group and that it be guaranteed free movement in and out of China. These disagreements formed the prelude to the final break, which came in the form of a letter by five of the Algerian group (the two had already apparently withdrawn) dated 13 April 1971 formally announcing its break with *Ma'ison* on the grounds of the organization's inability to include the phrase 'up to and including secession' in its acknowledgement of the principle of self-determination of nations. The letter concluded by pointing out that the ripe revolutionary conditions in the country made the immediate proclamation of a revolutionary organization a matter of the utmost importance and, hence, they had decided to go their own way and set up the necessary organization in a few months' time (*ibid.*: 75–82).

¹¹ Kiflu Tadesse (1993: 78) alleges that *Ma'ison* rejected the idea of group membership as it was 'tantamount to the formation of an organization within an organization'. While, according to Andargachew, such an objection was indeed raised in the course of the meeting, it was overruled by the majority position. Kiflu cites no source for his allegation, while Andargachew's account is based on *Ma'ison* records. Kiflu's account might well refer to the disagreement that ensued later over military training in China.

Both Andargachew and Kiflu, who have written the major histories of the two rival organizations (*Ma'ison* and EPRP, respectively) so far, agree that the major difference arose over the interpretation of the impending revolution and the steps to be taken in preparation for it. *Ma'ison* saw the revolution as a long-term process and hence urged a gradualist approach emphasizing political education. Conversely, EPRP perceived the matter with considerable urgency, particularly in view of the multiple armed uprisings that were dotting the Ethiopian political landscape; hence the need to set up the revolutionary vanguard organization that will lead the masses to armed struggle under a common multi-national political programme (*ibid.*: 83–84; Kiflu 1993: 79–81). This divergence of approach between the two groups has often been caricatured as *rajjem guzoism* (proposing ‘the long journey’) vs. *acher guzzoism* (proposing ‘the short journey’), but there seems to have been some element of truth in the characterization. Be that as it may, April 1971 might very well go down in history as the fateful moment when the two organizations chose to go their separate ways, with ultimately disastrous consequences for the Ethiopian Left.

The first confrontation between the two sides erupted within a year, following the formation of the Ethiopian National Liberation Front (ENLF) in August 1971. ESUE (read *Ma'ison*) hailed the formation of the front, dedicating a special issue of its bulletin, *Teglachen*, to explaining its background and featuring its programme. It greeted the new organization with considerable exuberance:

በዚህ ግንባር መመስረት ለመላው የኢትዮጵያ ህዝብ አዲስና ከፍተኛ የትግል ምእራፍ መሆኑ ጥርጥር የለውም፡፡ ... በአውሮፓ የኢትዮጵያ ተማሪዎች ማህበር ከኢትዮጵያ ገጽ አምፔሪያሊዝምን፣ ፊውዳሊዝምንና በጠቅላላው ጭቆናን በልዩ ልዩ መልኩ አጠራቅሞ በሀገሪቱ ላይ የሰፈረውን የጨለማ አገዛዝ ለመደምሰስ ከሚሰሩ ሃይሎች ጋር ለመተባበር ያለውን የጋለ ምኞት ባለፉት አመታት ደጋግሞ አስታውቋል፡፡ ስለዚህ የዚህን ደረፈውዳልና ደረኢምፔሪያሊስት የሆነ አርነት ግንባር መመስረት በሰማ ጊዜ ማህበራችን እጃግ ከፍ ያለ ደስታ ተሰምቶታል፡፡ (*Teglachen*, Ter 1964/January 1972)

There is no doubt that the founding of this front marks a new and higher chapter of struggle for the entire Ethiopian people. The Ethiopian Students Union in Europe has reiterated its ardent desire to join with forces working for the overthrow of the oppressive order that has been imposed on the country, including feudalism, imperialism and all other forms of oppression. Thus, it has received the news of the establishment of this anti-feudal and anti-imperialist liberation front with jubilation.

According to the background information, ENLF had its origin in the peasant rebellion that had raged in the Bale region in the 1960s. The Oromo leaders of that movement had initially affiliated with the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), which was fighting to separate the Somali-inhabited region of the Ogaden from Ethiopia. But, according to the information, when they discovered that WSLF had become totally subservient to the Mogadishu regime and was

furthering its interests, they broke away to form ENLF as a broad front for all Ethiopians struggling against the Haile Sellassie regime. Among the principal objectives of the front was the overthrow of the feudal regime and its replacement by a democratic republic, the establishment of a decentralized system recognizing the rights of 'tribes' ('nationalities') for self-determination, land redistribution, and pursuit of the principle of non-alignment in foreign relations and good-neighbourliness, especially with the Sudan and Somalia (*ibid.*).

By contrast, the EPRP side – or, to be more precise, the EPLO (the Ethiopian People's Liberation Organization), as it was known at this stage – was far from enthusiastic about the newly established front. Kiflu, who characterizes the EPLO's reaction to the emergence of ENLF as one of 'alarm' and 'surprise', goes on to explain this attitude by fear of Oromo militants of the student movement defecting to yet another nationalist organization, after the large-scale shift of allegiance in the late 1960s of Eritrean militants of the Ethiopian Student Movement to the embryonic Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which was deemed to be more progressive than the Eritrean Liberation Front, the organization that had been leading the armed struggle in Eritrea since 1961. Pro-EPLO activists accordingly chastised the ESUE executive committee for unilaterally taking a stand on the new organization. But, a motion to amend the constitution with a view to limiting the power of the executive committee in between the annual congresses, tabled by the pro-EPLO elements at the 12th ESUE Congress in the summer of 1972, failed to get the required two-thirds majority (Kiflu 1993: 81–84).

What is intriguing in the whole saga is the reversal of roles that the two sides exhibited in their position vis-à-vis ENLF. In theory, *Ma'ison* was the party that argued tirelessly that the premium should be placed on political education and mobilization rather than armed struggle. It even went to the extent of accusing its adversary of focoism. Conversely, EPLO tended to be more enthusiastic about the propitiousness of armed struggle under the prevailing circumstances – a combination of political repression and widespread opposition. In reality, therefore, the divergent stands of the two organizations probably reflected political positioning rather than ideological or political convictions. EPLO probably resented the emergence of a front that assumed the pan-Ethiopian mantle to which it aspired itself. By the same token, *Ma'ison* might very well have relished the pre-emption of the EPLO strategy that ENLF symbolized. But these positions tended to foster a perception of *Ma'ison* as pro-Oromo and of the EPLO/EPRP as anti-Oromo, something that became particularly palpable after the 1974 revolution and was reinforced by the predominant pattern of ethnic composition of their respective constituencies. A certain Ibsa Muleta, who described himself as 'an ESUE member', went to the extent of writing a long pamphlet in April 1975 accusing WWFES leaders, or the Tilahun Takele group as he preferred to call them, of

opposing the ENLF because it was 'stuffed with Oromo' and accusing it of double standards – supporting the Eritrean fronts in their struggle for self-determination but expressing reservations when it came to a predominantly Oromo front (Ibsa 1975).

The Algerian group inevitably played a prominent role in the formation of the EPLO. Three of its members – Benyam Adane, Berhane Meskel Redda and Eyasu Alemayehu – constituted the provisional organizing committee set up to launch the organization. They prepared the essential background documents, including an assessment of the Ethiopian situation, the constitution and the bylaws. The date for the setting up of the committee is not precisely known. But, from an assertion by Kiflu (1993: 85) that the process of forming the EPLO 'took over two years', one can extrapolate that it probably goes back to early 1970, as EPLO/EPRP was formally established in April 1972. This appears to be corroborated by a deposition of Berhane Meskel, who traces the discussions to form the organization to 1963 EC (1970/71).¹² This would suggest that preparations might well have been going on for some time when the Algerian group parted company with *Ma'ison* in April 1971. The two intervening years were marked by intense discussions – through correspondence as well as occasional personal visits – between the Algerian group and like-minded study groups that had been set up in Ethiopia, the United States, Europe, and Egypt and the Sudan.¹³

Contacts were also made with the Eritrean fronts – less successfully with the ELF, more fruitfully with the break-away cluster known as ELF-PLF (which subsequently became the EPLF), a two-person EPLO delegation (Berhane Meskel and Kiflu Taddese) meeting leaders of both fronts in December 1971. Kiflu pays special tribute to its foreign affairs chief, Osman Saleh Sabbe, whom he describes as 'the most cooperative in supporting multi-national organizations in Ethiopia' (Kiflu 1993: 97). This support was deemed essential for the armed insurgency that EPLO was expected to launch in northern Ethiopia, which had come to be chosen as the more promising option than southern Ethiopia. In the course of the same trip, the delegation also met the leaders of ENLF. Initially fruitful discussions led to the formation of a joint committee to chart a common programme; but these were abruptly discontinued

¹² 'Strictly Confidential', a nearly 100 page police report on the interrogation of Berhane Meskel after his capture in 1979: 2.

¹³ These contacts are described in considerable detail in Kiflu (1993: 92–96), with the group in the Soviet Union, where the author was based, being given a disproportionate share. What is interesting about the Soviet Union group is that two of its members – Alemu Abebe and Desta Taddese – were eventually to withdraw and join *Ma'ison*. Not all members of the Soviet group were privy to the events that were maturing and this state of affairs involved some cloak-and-dagger-like activities – something that is corroborated by Kiflu (1993: 93–94), who was privy to them, and by Efreem Dagne, who was not (Bahru 2010: 144). Berhane Meskel in his deposition (2–3) also gives the names of the persons who were contacted in the course of setting up the organization: Ethiopia (Tsegaye Gebre Medhin, Walelign Mekonnen, Zer'u Kishen, Tselote Hezkias, Yohannes Berhane and Tesfu Kidane); North America (Mesfin Habtu and '4–5 others'); Somalia (Belayneh Negatu); the Sudan (Fisseha Gebre Mikael, Kedir Mohammed, Yohannes Kifle, Berhanu Gameda and Yohannes Kasahun).

following the intervention of the ENLF head, Sheikh Hussein Sura (*ibid.*: 97–98)

The formal¹⁴ founding Congress of EPLO took place in April 1973 in West Berlin, in the house of a Trotskyite professor of the Free University of Berlin. Like all congresses of the Ethiopian student movement and the Left, it was a marathon affair, lasting a week (2–9 April), although the total number of delegates assembled was only nine! The delegates were meant to represent four geographical zones: Ethiopia, Eastern Europe (primarily the Soviet Union), the Middle East (in actual fact Algeria, i.e. North Africa), North America, and Western Europe. This more or less followed the pattern of representation at the WWUES/WWFES level, an anomaly being that Europe was divided into two parts in this particular case. At any rate, two delegates represented each zone: Kiflu Taddese and Mekonnen Jote (both from the Soviet Union) representing Eastern Europe, Abdissa Ayana and Eyasu Alemayehu the Middle East, Kiflu Teferra and Mohammed Mahfuz North America, and Melaku Tegegn and Tesfaye Debessay Western Europe. The ninth delegate was Berhane Meskel Redda, who had also been requested to represent the constituency inside Ethiopia,¹⁵ as the heightened security watch following the series of student hijackings had made the sending of delegates virtually impossible. They had earlier been consulted about the impending congress and they had reportedly insisted that the ESUE leadership should not be invited to it. The delegates did not feel any particular compunction about this exclusion. As Berhane Meskel, in his capacity as chairman of the provisional organizing committee, is said to have confidently stated at the beginning of the meeting, four-fifths of Ethiopian Marxists were represented and they could go ahead with forming the proletarian party! (Kiflu 1993: 98–100; Bahru 2010: 146–7).

The meeting discussed the minimum and maximum programmes of the organization. It selected the Ad Irob district in northeastern Tigray as the ideal base to launch the armed struggle. At this stage, EPLO was conceived as a broad front, with a Marxist-Leninist core being its main driving force. The meeting was concluded with the election of a seven-man central committee,¹⁶ plus two other members to be elected by the cell inside the country. The Central Committee in turn elected the politburo, consisting of Berhane Meskel Redda, Eyasu Alemayehu, Kiflu Mekuria, Kiflu Tadesse, Tesfaye Debessay and one of the two Central Committee members from inside the country. According to Berhane Meskel, that provision for the representation of the home front was not implemented because of the disagreement between the external and internal components of the organization following

¹⁴ I say 'formal' because Berhane Meskel in his deposition speaks as if EPLO had already been in existence before the Berlin congress.

¹⁵ In his deposition, Berhane Meskel actually claims he represented EPLO. Kiflu Mekuria is also repeatedly cited as Kiflu Taddese; it is not clear whether this is due to a memory lapse on the part of Berhane Meskel or faulty reporting by the police officer who conducted the interrogation.

¹⁶ It was worthy of note that one of those elected to the central committee (in absentia) was Desta Taddese, who subsequently defected to the rival organization, *Ma'ison*.

the unauthorized hijacking by Walelign and his group in December 1972.¹⁷ Berhane Meskel, who with his colleagues in Algeria had played a pivotal role in preparing the congress, was elected the party's first secretary-general and spokesman (Kiflu 1993: 98–102; Bahru 2010: 147–9). EPLO remained a clandestine organization until it surfaced as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) in the summer of 1975. *Ma'ison*, which had been set up four years earlier, took even longer to come out into the open. By then, the two organizations have clearly aligned themselves on opposite camps in the revolutionary process and were girding themselves up for the duel that killed them both.

NATIONAL LIBERATION FRONTS

The national liberation fronts that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s grew in considerable interaction with the student movement. One of them, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), could be said to have directly arisen out of that movement. The oldest of these fronts was the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). It could be said to have arisen directly out of the resentment that many Eritreans felt about the erosion by the imperial Ethiopian government of the UN-sponsored federal arrangement and was active in the Eritrean region since 1961. The story of ELF and of its offshoot and eventual nemesis, EPLF, has been recounted in detail elsewhere (Ruth 1997; Shumet 1992; Tesfatsion 1986, among others). Here, the interest is mainly on the bearing that the fronts came to have on the student movement and the leftist groups that emerged out of it. As shown above, it is clear that the fronts had a radicalizing influence on that movement. This came about in several ways. Many Eritrean students, often inspired by the liberation struggle going on in their region, played an important role in the student protests in the country. Eritrean students were also active in Ethiopian student organizations abroad, particularly inside ESUNA. More importantly, the importance that the national question assumed in the Ethiopian student movement had to do above all with the need to understand and accommodate the most serious armed challenge to the imperial regime. Indeed, almost all writings on that question turned primarily to the armed struggle in Eritrea to demonstrate the importance of the subject. Almost all resolutions passed had clauses specifically dealing with the armed struggle and its leadership.

And yet, the recognition of the right of the Eritrean people to self-determination up to and including independence did not succeed in persuading the Eritreans within the movement to remain within the fold and fight for a multi-national agenda. Many joined the Eritrean fronts in the early 1970s. The first to do so was Ammanuel Gebre

Yesus, one of the seven students who had hijacked an Ethiopian Airlines plane to the Sudan in the summer of 1969. After a short but tense period with his colleagues in Algiers, he joined the ELF. This was doubly ironic in that the major thesis on the national question, that by Tilahun Takele, was actually penned down in Algiers. Even more dramatically, as we have seen above, a group of students including Mussie Tesfa Mikael and Yohannes Sebhātu hijacked yet another Ethiopian Airlines plane in January 1971 and ultimately joined the newly set up EPLF. In North America, a number of active members of ESUNA, including Haile Menkerios, withdrew from that organization and set up a separate organization known as Eritreans for Liberation in North America (EFLNA).

EFLNA first emerged in early 1971 as the Eritrean Youth for Liberation (EYFL), apparently in response to the mass killings by Ethiopian troops of civilians in the town of Keren in December 1970; this was in retaliation to the ambush and killing of the Ethiopian military commander, Brigadier General Teshome Ergetu. The 'Keren Massacre', as it came to be known, had considerable impact on the Ethiopian student movement as well, leading to a number of resolutions condemning that act. According to Tesfatsion Medhanie, Naizgi Kiflu, a foreign emissary of the burgeoning EPLF in the early 1970s, was instrumental in setting up EYFL. On 18–20 June 1971, EYFL held its first congress in Washington DC. The meeting decided to support the PLF (Popular Liberation Forces), which was just breaking off from the ELF. The organization passed through an initial period of flux and uncertainty. However, the visit in late 1971 of the PLF leadership, including Osman Saleh Sabeh, Woldeab Wolde Mariam and Taha Nur, seemed to have had a galvanizing effect. The name of the organization was changed to EFLNA at the third congress of the organization on 24 December 1972. EFLNA and its counterpart in Europe, Eritreans for Liberation in Europe (EFLE), effectively became the youth wing of EPLF. It is interesting to note, however, that the two youth organizations seemed to differ in the level of critical distance they could maintain from the parent organization. In July 1976, for instance, the EFLNA Executive Committee wrote to its members declaring that the EFLE statement on the killing by the EPLF leadership of members of what came to be known the Menka'e group was entirely unfounded. At its 8th congress in August 1977, EFLNA decided to transform itself into the Association of Eritrean Students in North America (AESNA), with a corresponding organization for women called Association of Eritrean Women in North America (AEWNA). At the next congress, in August 1978, however, AESNA/EFLNA parted ways with EPLF when it denounced its 'capitulationist leadership' for its failure to dissociate itself from the 'revisionist' Soviet Union, even though the latter had supported the Ethiopian offensive against the Eritrean fronts. The divisions and confusion that followed among its membership led to the dissolution of EFLNA in 1979 (Mehretab 2007: 1–6, 9, 11).

EFLNA's relationship with ESUNA was characterized by some degree of ambivalence. For instance, there was some controversy within the organization when the EFLNA leadership sent some money to ESUNA on the occasion of the death of its leader, Mesfin Habtu, in late 1971. On the other hand, on 5 January 1973, the two organizations jointly organized a demonstration in Washington DC in protest at the killing in December 1972 of six activists as they were attempting to hijack an Ethiopian Airlines plane. This was the first concrete manifestation of the commitment that the leaders of the two organizations had entered into for mutual cooperation in the struggle against the common enemy. Yet, when the struggle for hegemony between ELF and EPLF began to emerge, EFLNA accused ESUNA of not coming out unequivocally on the side of EPLF. Even more substantial divergence of views emerged when ESUNA refused to accept the EPLF thesis that the Eritrean question was a colonial question, and not a national one as the Ethiopian student movement had come to understand it all along. This led to the labelling of ESUNA and its allied women's study group as 'social chauvinists' by EFLNA at its 8th congress (Mehretab 2007: 3–7, 12).

A grim fate awaited most of the former student activists who joined the EPLF in the field. Many of them ended up being killed by the EPLF leadership, accused of being ultra-leftists or, even worse, Ethiopian government spies. The list of these first victims of EPLF's – and more specifically Isayas Afeworki's – quest for absolute power is fairly long: Mussie Tesfa Mikael, generally recognized as leader of the Menka'e group, Yohannes Sebhatu, Meles Gebre Mariam, Petros Yohannes, Tesfu Kidane, among others. The last two were particularly active as editors of *Struggle*. The first English editor of the journal, Temesgen Haile, died quite early on, but the circumstances of his death are shrouded in mystery. He was apparently arrested in Addis Ababa on suspicion of developing secret links with the Eritrean fronts and it is believed that he either committed suicide by jumping off a tall building or was thrown off it.

We have seen in some detail the divergent reception that the ENLF had among the two rival parties that sprouted out of the student movement, EPRP and *Ma'ison*. Its pan-Ethiopian programme notwithstanding, ENLF was primarily an Oromo organization, forming an intermediary stage between the Mecha-Tulama Association of the 1960s and the Oromo Liberation Front that emerged in 1976. While some former student activists joined the OLF, it is with another leftist organization, the Ethiopian Oppressed Peoples' Revolutionary Struggle, more commonly known by its Amharic acronym *Ich'at*, that former student activists and leaders of Oromo origin were associated. *Ich'at* worked closely with *Ma'ison*, and both were forced to go underground in early 1977, withdrawing from the coalition of pro-Darg organizations, *Imaledeh* (Amharic acronym for Union of Ethiopian Marxist Organizations). Among the leaders of *Ich'at* was Baro Tumsa, an Oromo from

Wallaga and president of UCU in 1964/65, who was reportedly killed as he tried to escape from the clutches of the Darg.

Of the national liberation fronts, the one that was perhaps most closely associated with the student movement was the TPLF, which eventually came to power in 1991 through an ostensibly pan-Ethiopian front, EPRDF. Student activists of Tigrayan origin could conveniently be divided into two 'generations'. It is more for convenience than accuracy that the label 'generation' is used here, however, as the two groups were only a few years apart in age. Be that as it may, the first 'generation' adopted a pan-Ethiopian approach to solving the country's problems and played a prominent role in the emergence of the multi-ethnic leftist organizations, notably the EPRP. This 'generation' included Abbay Abraha, Berhane Meskel Redda, Tesfaye Debessay, and Zer'u Kishen. Indeed, it is of some interest to note that of the five members of the first EPRP Politburo elected in 1972, three – Berhane Meskel, Tesfaye and Zer'u – were from Tigray. The second 'generation' chose the ethno-nationalist path and went on to form the TPLF. This divergence in orientation arose from their differing interpretations of the Ethiopian reality. The first generation saw the Tigrayan problem as part of the common Ethiopian problem and hence adopted the strategy of solving it through class struggle. The second laid emphasis on the specific problems that the region had faced – including its marginalization since the death of Emperor Yohannes in 1889 – and placed utmost priority on solving those problems. It drew its inspiration primarily from the First Wayane (1943), as is clearly reflected in the Tigrayan name of their organization – Hezbawi Wayane Harenat Tigray. What is significant about this divergence in orientation was that, as the war between TPLF and EPRP raged in the late 1970s, the two 'generations' found themselves pitted against one another.

The TPLF had its origins in the Tigray University Students Association (TUSA), which was established in 1971. In the early years, members of TUSA partook of both mainstream student union (i.e. USUAA) activities as well as those strictly pertaining to their ethno-nationalist association. It was as if, to borrow from the academic curricular lexicon, they were majoring in one and minoring in the other. Which one was one's 'major' and which one's 'minor' varied from one student to another. Some, like Meles Tekle and Berhane Eyasu, were known more for the former than for the latter. Meles was one of three activists who were executed by the Darg in 1974 on trumped up charges of bombing public buildings in the capital; his name has survived through one of his admirers, the subsequent EPRDF leader, Meles (né Legesse) Zenawi, who adopted his hero's name as his *nom de guerre*. Berhane eventually ended up joining the EPRP. Others, probably the majority, clearly put the premium on the ethno-nationalist agenda. TUSA members engaged in sensitizing both Tigrayan professionals and businessmen and students in Tigray about what they considered to be the particularly deplorable conditions of their region. The urban centres

in particular became major arenas of student agitation, with the town of Adwa as the main centre of such agitation. TUSA activists appeared to have enjoyed the unwitting cooperation of the hereditary, if progressive, governor of Tigray, *Ras Mengesha Seyoum*. A former Tigrayan member of parliament, *Gessesew Ayele* (more commonly known by his *nom de guerre* *Sehul*), was to play a pivotal role in launching the armed struggle in 1975 and sustaining it in its early difficult years. Gradually, a more ideologically conscious caucus within TUSA, calling itself *Mahbar Gasgasti Behere Tigray* (Association of Progressives of the Tigray Nation) emerged. It was more commonly known as the Tigray National Organization (TNO) and was to be the springboard for the more enduring Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). TPLF launched the armed struggle against the Darg regime in February 1975 from the forlorn village of Dedebeit located in Shire province, northwestern Tigray (Aregawi 2009: 49–63; Young 1997: 76–80). That armed struggle eventually culminated in 1991 in its seizure of state power, something that had eluded the acrimonious multi-ethnic Left.

8

Conclusion: The Legacy

*I was born in a volcano, I lived in the midst of its eruption,
I will be buried in its lava.¹*

For about a decade and a half in the middle of the past century, Ethiopian students made a decisive and fateful intervention in the national affairs of their country. In a system that did not brook any formal political dissent, they effectively became His Majesty's Disloyal Opposition. They began rather tentatively, reciting poems of social and political satire that were barely tolerated by the imperial regime. They ended with hijackings of passenger aircraft and armed struggle. In between, they punctuated their struggle with annual, almost ritual, demonstrations and, in some extreme circumstances, embassy occupations. The cumulative effect of this unrelenting opposition was the eruption of the 1974 revolution, even if that event could not be attributed entirely to the student movement. The more than decade-long armed struggle in Eritrea, the disastrous 1973 famine in northern Ethiopia, and the energy crisis that attended the Arab-Israeli (Yom Kippur) War were other contributory factors. Neither did the impact of the student movement end with the eruption of the revolution. It continued to determine the contours and trajectory of post-revolutionary developments. The two leftist parties that batted it out for hegemony emerged directly out of the movement. While they were consumed by the revolutionary conflagration, the ethno-nationalist groups that arose in the periphery of the movement but were nurtured by its ideology, notably the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), endured to determine the post-1991 political configuration of the country. The force that came to dominate the revolutionary process, the Darg, was baptized in the ideology of the student movement, graduating from the essentially nationalist formation that it was at the beginning to parading as the ultimate authority in Marxism-Leninism a few years later.

Whatever its Marxist-Leninist credentials, there is general consensus

¹ Marc-Antoine Jullien, young French Jacobin reminiscing about his revolutionary career (Luzzatto, in Levi & Schmitt 1997: 186).

that the seventeen-year tenure of the Darg was one of almost unmitigated gloom. The only redeeming feature of that tenure was the land reform proclamation of March 1975, which could be said to have been a resounding response both to the passionate calls of the reforming intellectuals of the early twentieth century to alleviate the lot of the tribute-paying peasant (the *gabbar*) and the slogan of 'Land to the Tiller' articulated by the students in 1965. But that proclamation, radical as it was by any standards, was vitiated by stifling control that replaced the old landlord by the new landlord of the state through the agency of the peasant association. In the end, land did not become the property of the tiller. This state control of arguably the most important resource of the country has persisted to this day. In the end, the Darg is remembered more for its bloody repression, culminating in the Red Terror, and its failure to handle the northern insurgency that ultimately spelt its doom and tore the country apart.

The Darg was succeeded in 1991 by a regime with more direct links to the student movement and with relatively more credible Marxist-Leninist credentials. There is no better indication of its continuity with the student movement than the way in which it has pushed the movement's recipe for the solution of the national question to its logical conclusion – its enshrinement of the principle of self-determination up to and including secession in the 1994 constitution and the division of the country into ostensibly autonomous ethno-linguistic regions. But ethnic federalism has had its critics, both political and academic, who have viewed it as continuation of the domination of the centre by other means. Economically, it is largely seen as privileging the few. Politically, the outward manifestation of democratic governance appears to have crumbled in the wake of the country's first free and democratic elections in 2005.

These developments, which have with some justification been viewed as a legacy of the Ethiopian student movement, have induced people to look at it with considerable scepticism, not to say hostility. As Sara Vaughan has aptly observed: 'it has been credited or damned with responsibility for just about everything that has happened in Ethiopia since the early 1970s' (Vaughan 2003: 128). All too often, the blemishes of the past four decades are attributed to it. Conversely, there is a tendency to view the ruler on whom the students vented their fury as the maligned emperor. His rehabilitation seems to go hand in hand with the vilification of the students. Did the student radicals of the 1960s and 1970s have it all wrong? Do they owe the country an apology for the warped political path the country has taken in the past four decades, as was indeed argued by one of the participants to the retreat that was organized in September 2005 to reflect on the student movement (Bahru 2010: 16)? Could Ethiopian history have taken a different path in the 1960s and could the country have thus avoided the tribulations that it has been made to endure since the mid-1970s? The primary task of historians is to record what happened, as it happened, not to justify

or condemn it. Nonetheless, given the momentous significance of the student movement for the country's recent history, it is incumbent on the historian not so much to postulate what could have happened as to try and explain why events happened the way they did. The objective of this concluding chapter is thus to bring together the insights that one might gain from the preceding chapters and the conclusions, implicit or explicit, drawn therein, with a view to understanding better the place of the student movement in the political and intellectual history of the country.

The rebellion of youth is almost as old as human history. What is striking is not only its continuity but also its universality. This has been particularly the case in the past two centuries or so. Even if not everybody might have viewed youth and student protests with the nonchalance and indulgence of the Egyptian MP quoted in Chapter 1, there was a general perception of their inevitability. While youth might sometimes have been used to reactionary ends, it has generally been an agency of social change and social justice. It is this belief in youth that drove the prophets of change and renewal in nineteenth century Europe to give their organizations and movements the epithet of 'Young'. Thus, the prophet of Italian unification, Giuseppe Mazzini, headed what came to be known as 'Young Italy' and 'Young Europe'. Nay, the two movements went as far as setting an age limit of forty for membership, implying that those above that age could not be trusted to struggle for the desired change (Levi & Schmitt 1997: 199). The nomenclature, if not necessarily the age limit, continued into the twentieth century with such organizations as 'Young Turk' and 'Young Egypt'. Even where there was no organization by such name, foreign observers bestowed the name on the reformist intellectuals of the early twentieth century, calling them 'Young Ethiopia'.

Fairly often, youth meant students, and students have been in the forefront of revolutionary processes since the 1848 revolutions that swept across Europe. They also played a not inconsiderable role in the build-up to the Russian revolution of 1917. In China, what came to be known as the May 4 Movement in 1919 was a direct reaction to the sense of betrayal that the Chinese felt by the attitude of the victorious Allied powers towards their country's long-standing territorial aspirations.

Elsewhere, students had spearheaded movements that changed regimes – as in Japan and Turkey in 1960, Bolivia and Sudan in 1964 and Mali in 1991 – or brought about revolutions – as in Iran in 1979. In Egypt, the student movement was inspired by the nationalist struggle against first British and then Israeli occupation of Egyptian territory. Harbingers of revolutions or regime change though they might have been, students have rarely managed to own the post-revolutionary process. In Iran, they were shunted off by the mullahs, and the socialist republic they had dreamt of gave way to an Islamic theocracy. In post-Mubarak Egypt, as well, one saw the youth who led the Tahrir Square

movement being relegated to the sidelines and the two oldest organized institutions – the military and the Muslim Brotherhood – fighting it out for supreme power.

For many people, however, it is the student protests of the late 1960s, particularly in the West, that the term student movement evokes. In that respect, the year 1968 has attained iconic status, even if the protests in Germany antedated it by a year and those in the US were to continue into the 1970s. Probably the unseating in France of the towering figure of De Gaulle invested that year with special significance. That was the nearest Western students came to regime change. Elsewhere, the political institutions were sufficiently robust to weather the storm. Instead, what happened was a cultural revolution that was more palpable than the one that was paraded in that name in China. That revolution was to change Western music tastes, dress code, sex habits and life style in general in fundamental ways. The Ethiopian student movement was very much part of the global movement of the late 1960s. As in the West, it was inspired by Cuba, more particularly the emblematic figure of Che Guevara, and came out in solidarity with Vietnam. One of the most popular songs of the Ethiopian student movement goaded students to emulate Ho Chi Minh and Che Guevara and wage armed struggle. While beholden to the Old Left, particularly Mao in later years, it imbibed its Marxist theory from the New Left as well – Marcuse, Fanon, *Monthly Review*, *New Left Review*, etc. A cult of revolutionary violence pervaded both. Like the German Baader-Meinhof group, the Italian Red Brigades, the Black Panthers of the USA and the Tupamaros of Uruguay, Ethiopian students experimented with the whole gamut of revolutionary violence – from the plane hijackings of the late 1960s and early 1970s to the urban insurrection of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) in the mid-1970s and the rural armed struggle of EPRP and TPLF in subsequent years. Albeit to a lesser degree than in the West, Ethiopia partook of the cultural revolution of the 1960s – opting for informal attire and the Afro hairstyle, for instance, in lieu of the impeccable uniform and the closely cropped hair of the early University College of Addis Ababa (UCAA) days.

But, the divergence between the Ethiopian and the global student movements is as striking as the convergence. To begin with, the Ethiopian movement had to grapple with an authoritarian system that had no room for organized political opposition, pushing the students to arrogate to themselves the role of that opposition. Ethiopian student unions effectively became political parties, with their annual congresses, their resolutions, their power structure and their exhortative songs. Second, few movements in the West were as sustained as the Ethiopian one. Particularly after 1965, Ethiopian students came out in annual demonstrations; these were first largely by university students but later spread to the high schools. This unrelenting opposition attained its peak in 1969, not in 1968 as in the West. That peak year also had transformative significance as it marked the transition of the movement

from student protests to armed confrontation with the regime, not only through the resort to plane hijackings but also with the raising of the issue that the regime dreaded most – the national question. To better understand the distinctive features of the Ethiopian student movement, therefore, one has to appreciate the specific political and cultural context within which it operated.

Ethiopian students were not the first to advocate social and political change for their country. They had illustrious predecessors in the reformist intellectuals of the early twentieth century. Even if less vociferously than the students, those intellectuals had campaigned for social justice, the expansion of education and the rationalization of administration. They had some degree of success with the young heir to the throne, Tafari, who implemented some of their recommendations for reform in the first years of his reign. But the Fascist Italian invasion of 1935 put an abrupt end to this period of controlled reform. The intellectuals were either killed or sent into exile. Nor did the emperor have much use for them, particularly the more independent-minded among them, once he had attained his primary objective of absolute power. The post-1941 period was thus one of relative intellectual placidity, with the old critical spirit giving way to sycophancy, particularly in the media. The only redeeming feature was a literary and artistic effervescence, which started somewhat tentatively but attained its climax in the 1960s. Some of these literary works fed into the political dissent that was to be the hallmark of the student movement.

All this is not to say that imperial Ethiopia did not show any progress in the post-1941 period. In a way, the Silver Jubilee of the emperor's coronation in 1955, when many of these achievements were showcased, marked the pinnacle of imperial progress. The emperor was particularly proud of his achievements in the educational sphere, having opened the first college in 1950. Ultimately, though, as one of his stalwarts is reputed to have warned him, his aim of nurturing pliable bureaucrats backfired as the educational system, particularly at its tertiary level, produced his most implacable opponents. The extent of his failure became glaringly obvious in 1969 when one of the university students ridiculed his record in an unprecedented riposte to his speech. That riposte could also be viewed as an angry reaction to the personality cult of the emperor that had been assiduously cultivated, in the schools and through the media, in the post-1941 years. The inherent problems of the educational system itself, particularly the high rates of attrition and failure in the school-leaving examinations, were to fire up the high school students to a no less formidable challenge of the system in the early 1970s.

Just as the students had intellectual antecedents, they also could be said to have had political predecessors. The malaise of the imperial system had begun to be felt by members of the ruling class as well as those who were looking at it from outside. It was above all the abortive coup d'état of 1960 that formed, in more ways than one, the imme-

diated political backdrop to the student movement. The brain behind that coup, Geremame Neway, was in effect the bridge that linked the reforming intellectuals of the first half of the twentieth century with the student radicals of the second. The students also gave furtive support to the coup, even venturing out onto the streets in its support. The strident leaflets that continued to appear after the suppression of the coup inaugurated a culture of pamphleteering that was to be taken to the highest level by the students. Gentler remonstrations with the emperor to attend to the problems that had triggered the coup fell on deaf ears.

An indication of the fundamental malaise of the system was the way in which the suppressor(s) of one plot or rebellion eventually turned against the regime. Thus, Mengistu Neway, the leader of the 1960 coup, had himself foiled earlier plots against the regime. Not only did he lead the unit that captured the Gojjame Resistance hero Belay Zelleqe after his escape from prison in 1943 but he also commanded the raid that resulted in the capture of *Bitwaddad* Negash Bezabih and his accomplices in 1951. General Mer'ed Mengesha, who led the loyalist forces against Mengistu, himself soon joined a group of functionaries of the imperial regime to urge the emperor to introduce reforms before it was too late. Colonel Taddese Berru, whose Rapid Deployment Force played a pivotal role in the suppression of the 1960 coup, was detained in 1966 after he assumed leadership of the Mecha and Tulama Association. Another manifestation of the malaise of the imperial order under Haile Sellassie was its policy of centralization. This might have been partly dictated by the imperative of establishing a modern state apparatus. But, its insensitivity to local traditions and sentiments was to explode in its face. Thus, the regime was checkered by rebellions of ethno-nationalist vintage right from the beginning of the post-1941 period. In Tigray, the Wayane uprising of 1943 attracted considerable support before it was crushed, but not without leaving a mythology that was to inspire a second, more successful, uprising in the region in 1975. The decade-long Bale uprising of the 1960s was an amalgam of Somali irredentism and Oromo nationalism. More importantly, the failure of the imperial regime to accommodate the UN-sponsored federation with Eritrea triggered a sustained armed struggle that was to have a radicalizing effect on both the students and the soldiers, quite apart from corroding the regime and draining the country's resources.

The 1960 coup had a radicalizing effect on the students and this was to be manifested within months. The early years of college life at UCAA were marked by a sedate cultivation of one's intellect and personality. 'Know thyself, know thy country' appeared to be the motto. The end goal was the formation of the all-round student, the good citizen. Students were expected to excel not only in their academic pursuits but also in sports and public speech. The Debating Society trained students in the art of defending even the indefensible, to be even the devil's advocate. The Ethnological Society was the highest fulfilment of the 'Know

thy Country' motto. But, there was no doubt as to where the accent was to be placed – on the curricular, not the 'extra-curricular' activities. Students both at home and abroad enjoyed royal patronage, marked by surprise visits of the emperor at dinner time and royal largesse to cover the costs of annual gatherings, which tended to be more social than political. Not without reason, Ethiopian students in the UK called their journal *The Lion Cub*, for they considered themselves loyal offspring of the Lion of Judah. Campus life at UCAA was rich and privileged, the blue black blazer with the college insignia and the grey trousers giving the students a distinctive aura. Hence the sense of bereavement that UCAA students felt when their cherished institution was swallowed by Haile Sellasie I University (HSIU) and the bitter resentment they felt at the 'expropriation' of UCAA assets by the new university.

If the students had anything to fight against at all in these early years, it was the authoritarian regime of the Jesuits, who had been entrusted by the emperor to steer the novel experiment in higher education, very much in the manner in which Emperor Menilek could only trust the Copts to introduce a tempered edition of modern education earlier in the century. But political confrontation was still some way off. The preferred mode was social and eventually political satire. Ethiopia had a rich tradition of both. This was buttressed by a cult of anonymity, including the use of pseudonyms, to which the early students had liberal resort, initiating a culture that was to be the hallmark of Ethiopian political life throughout the second half of the twentieth century.

Where they could not use pseudonyms was in the poems that they composed for and recited on College Day. It was one such poem, presented at the 1961 College Day, that brought the halcyon days of palace-college relations to an end. In retrospect, the palace could be said to have over-reacted to a poem that dared to describe the life of the poor. The result was even greater defiance by the students the following year and even more senseless retaliation by the government, including the abolition of the boarding system and the first suspension of students. Designed to punish the students, the abolition of the boarding system brought them ever closer to the community. Community service, in the form of conducting literacy classes and opening schools, had been all along an overriding concern of UCAA students, next perhaps to the motto of 'Know thyself, know thy country'. The Ethiopian University Service, which most students felt was a student idea that was 'hijacked' by the university administration, arose from such commitment to community service. Be that as it may, it was to be an important element in the academic and political formation of university students throughout much of the 1960s.

What has not perhaps been given sufficient emphasis is that the Ethiopian student movement grew in a pan-African setting at home and in tandem with the American civil rights movement as well as African-American radicalism abroad. Inside the country, the pan-African dimension was particularly important in its formative stage. Nor could

other international contacts be discounted in the radicalization of students. Sometimes, it could come from unexpected quarters, as in the one-year sojourn in Norway of the student leader Gebeyehu Ferissa that so transformed him and contributed to the 'wind of change' that began to blow in the UCAA campus. The 1960 coup, which was to have such a decisive impact on students and on society at large, occurred between the inspirational speech that Gebeyehu gave on his return and the poem by Tamiru Feyissa that broke the umbilical cord between palace and campus.

But, the radicalization of Ethiopian students, both at home and abroad, was a cumulative process rather than a sudden occurrence. It began in 1962 on the home front, took a decisive leap in 1965 both inside and outside the country, and attained its climax in 1969. In this long process of radicalization, the 'Land to the Tiller' demonstration of 1965 has rightly been singled out as a landmark event. While the demonstration was staged inside the country, its reverberations were felt among the student movement abroad, thereby accelerating its radicalization, as was reflected in the resolutions of the Ethiopian Students Union in Europe (ESUE) and Ethiopian Students Association in North America congresses in the summer of 1965. It showed that students were ready to challenge the regime on the question that mattered most both to its stalwarts and to the overwhelming majority of the country's population. Thus, a regime that was incapable of even regulating tenancy was confronted with a revolutionary slogan that presaged its abolition. Once hurled onto the national stage, the slogan refused to go away until it found its resolution in the March 1975 proclamation that nationalized all rural land. Again, the government's reaction to that demonstration – the banning of the student union and its newspaper followed by the suspension of nine students – could only exacerbate the situation.

This pattern of government over-reaction was to continue in subsequent student demonstrations, with the exception of the 1966 one, when the government was more accommodating of student demands. The sober recommendations of the Awad-Strauss Report, commissioned after the confrontations of 1967, remained unheeded. The report had urged the university to view student protests with some degree of indulgence while enjoining the students to appreciate the limits of academic freedom. Government/university hypersensitivity reached its highest point in 1968, when it elevated a minor misconduct by a group of students into a general confrontation with the student body. In 1969, roles were reversed and the students launched one attack after another against the regime, even after royal clemency was shown to the students sentenced to various terms of imprisonment. Inevitably, the year ended in a government crackdown that changed the rules of the game in a decisive manner, the more radical students beginning to consider seriously the option of armed struggle.

minority of students played in this radicalization process is incontestable. In the Ethiopian case, this role has generally been attributed to the group that came to be known as the Crocodiles. As in all such attributions, the Crocodiles may have been credited with more than they actually deserved. But, there seems no doubt that, at least for the home front, they formed a nucleus around which the radical and subsequently Marxist-Leninist core of the movement grew. They and their followers constituted the most effective agitational group behind almost every demonstration. They had an uncanny capacity to identify issues around which students could rally and to encapsulate them in catchy slogans: 'Land to the Tiller!' 'Is Poverty a Crime?' 'Education for All' etc. That they were able to mobilize hundreds, sometimes thousands, of students around these issues is sufficient indication of the resonance that the issues had among the general student body. Unfortunately, however, the radical core was also responsible for the injection into student debates of a degree of self-righteousness and dogmatism that contributed ultimately to the split of the student movement. This was a tone that contrasted sharply with the genteel accommodation of the early 1960s. Unlike their predecessors, the radicals of the late 1960s were not content with wishing wistfully 'That will be the day . . .'. They wanted to see that day there and then.

Again through the tireless efforts of the small group of radical students, Marxism-Leninism was to be the credo of the student movement. But the accent was clearly on the Leninist rather than the Marxist component of that ideology. Although some students toyed with the ideas of the New Left, it was the Old Left that held sway. Lenin, and even more so Stalin, provided ready-made formulae to solve the 'national question'; Mao provided the manual for protracted guerrilla warfare. Thus, Marxism-Leninism became a dogma that could interpret the Ethiopian reality, not a theory that could be deployed intelligently to analyse it. On the soil of Christian orthodoxy were sown the seeds of Marxist orthodoxy. The tradition of 'Know thy country' initiated by the Ethnological Society could not be sustained.

In an effort to give the movement a broader base, the anti-feudal and anti-imperialist nature of the struggle was emphasized, particularly by student unions abroad. While the feudal nature of Ethiopian society was palpable, the imperialist penetration of the country was less evident, apart from the US communications base in Asmara (Kagnew), which became a recurrent target of student agitation. Vietnam provided additional motivation for the anti-Americanism that characterized the student movement in the second half of the 1960s. Yet, there persisted for long an air of ambivalence about student attitude to the USA with students torn between the magic of the Kennedy name and the hated American military presence. It was Vietnam that tipped the balance in January 1968 when, during the visit of Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, the effigy of President Johnson and the American flag and dollar were burnt. That formed the backdrop for the ensuing duel

between the American academic vice-president of the university and the student unions.

The year 1969 stands out as a climactic year in the history of the student movement. It was in that year that the movement spread to the lower tiers of the educational system. Indeed, from then on, the initiative could be said to have passed to high school students. It was also a year when the emperor's person became a direct target of student agitation both at home and abroad, ranging from a student's unsparing riposte to his speech to the smashing of his portraits during embassy occupations. Although not evident at the time, it was also the year when one of the budding leftist organizations, *Ma'ison*, became directly involved in fanning student agitation. In a bid to stem the tide, the government took the unprecedented step of sentencing students to long terms of imprisonment. Far from being checked by such measures, student protests continued, attaining a new level of militancy with the hijacking of a plane by seven university students in August 1969. Even after the government announced an amnesty to the sentenced students and agreed to the return of the suspended ones, the protests continued, creating 'even more demands from the inexhaustible pool of grievances of the Ethiopian people', as one of the leaflets put it.

As the year was coming to its last quarter, there were all the elements of an impending pitched battle between the government and students. As the former elaborated contingency plans to contain the students, the latter gave a preview of their future socialist programme with the 'nationalization' of the Alumni Association café on campus. Even more seriously, they vented something that had been considered taboo thitherto – the question of nationalities. The government saw that in effect as a declaration of war. Things came to a head on 28 December, as the president of the University Students Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA), Tilahun Gizaw, was assassinated and his body became a bone of contention between the students and government forces. As it happened, the government chose to deploy troops of the popular Imperial Bodyguard to crush the students, thus killing two birds with one stone, as it were – the mythology surrounding the 1960 coup as well as the intransigence of the students. The faculty stood up against the brutality with which the Bodyguard troops carried out their mission. Not content to snatch away the body of the student leader, they had beaten up students mercilessly with a view to teaching them a lesson they will never forget. The university commission set up to investigate the events urged understanding on the part of the government and university administration and restraint on the part of the students, very much in the spirit of the Awad-Strauss Report of 1968. But, by then, neither party was prepared to listen. The ultimate significance of the final showdown between students and government probably lay in precipitating the exodus of many radical students, thus contributing to a significant change in the complexion and direction of the student movement abroad.

In the end, the enduring importance of 1969 was perhaps in the first airing of what came to be known as 'the question of nationalities' or 'the national question'. Even if not couched in those terms, the question was first addressed at the 17th Congress of ESUNA in the summer. That Congress prescribed regional autonomy as the solution to what it perceived as the problem of regionalism. Inside the country, there was little to prepare one for the abruptness with which the question burst onto the scene. Earlier resolutions of the national union as well as the writings of radical students were preoccupied with what were described as the problems of 'sectarianism' or 'tribalism'. Things began to change in the summer of 1969, when a small group of students came up with a radically different approach, which envisaged the support of ethno-nationalist movements not only in their own right but as a stepping stone to the multi-national liberation struggle. It was this new position that Waleign Mekonnen, with fresh memories of his own interactions with Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and Oromo prisoners during his detention, presented to a packed audience at the Christmas Hall of HSIU in October 1969, and later published in *Struggle*.

Waleign's rather raw utterances on the principle of self-determination were later amplified and reinforced with Leninist and Stalinist rhetoric by Tilahun Takele. Directed principally against the resolutions of the 17th Congress of Ethiopian Students Union in North America (ESUNA), Tilahun's tract advanced for the first time the principle of self-determination *up to and including secession*. The tract initiated a far from salutary tradition of polemical discourse in student politics. All the same, it was the document around which the debates at both the 11th ESUE Congress and the 19th ESUNA Congress in the summer of 1971 revolved. In the end, both Congresses adopted the principle. While ESUE adopted the principle after a vigorous debate, the majority vote at the ESUNA Congress precipitated a walkout by the minority, resulting in the split of the organization. At any rate, the principle eventually became the credo of the multi-ethnic leftist organizations as well as the ethno-nationalist organizations that grew out of the student movement.

As is well known, the principle of self-determination up to and including secession became an important element of the charter of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia that was set up in 1991 and it has come to be enshrined in the constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The pertinent article (Article 39.1) was hotly contested at the time of its adoption in 1994 and still continues to be a subject of considerable controversy. What many people are probably not aware of is that the debate is not new. It was a debate that raged in the student movement throughout the early 1970s, even after the formal adoption of the principle by ESUE and ESUNA. Opponents of what eventually became the official line, while they accepted the principle of self-determination in general, found the obsession with secession (*idée fixe*, as one of their partisans dubbed it) unpalatable.

Proponents of the dominant line argued that it is precisely by going the extra mile and recognizing the right of nations to *political* self-determination (i.e. the right to form an independent state) that one could discourage secession and rally all nationalist movements behind the multi-national class struggle. They went on to formulate a neat division of labour whereby progressive forces of oppressor nations would fight for the right of secession while those of oppressed ones would advocate voluntary integration.

That, unfortunately, proved an attractive formula that was not translated into reality. By the second half of the 1970s, the multi-national groups that had adopted the principle of political self-determination were forced to review their stand. This was induced largely by the conduct of the Eritrean liberation groups, particularly the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and its youth wing Eritreans for Liberation in North America (EFLNA), to accommodate whom the stand had been taken in the first place. EPLF asserted that the Eritrean question was not a national question after all, as the student movement and the leftist parties that emerged from it had maintained all along, but a colonial question. The logic of this assertion was that the Eritrean struggle could only have independence as its logical conclusion, thereby ruling out the possibility of voluntary integration with Ethiopia. In reaction to this unexpected twist, the new ESUNA was to dedicate an entire issue of its organ, *Combat*, in 1976 to a denunciation of the local (narrow) nationalism that was being propagated by EFLNA and to argue passionately for the primacy of class struggle, in effect going back to the position of the old ESUNA that had been rejected at the 19th Congress. Likewise, after EPRP fell out with EPLF on the colonial question, it began to de-emphasize the element of secession in the principle of self-determination.

TPLF, the other leftist organization that emerged out of the student movement, not only stuck to the crucial rider of secession in the principle of self-determination but also accepted the EPLF thesis that the Eritrean question was a colonial question. According to Aregawi Berhe, one of the founding members of the TPLF who also served successively as its chairman and military commander until he was purged in 1986, there were two factions within the organization. The first, largely side-lined in the course of the armed struggle, emphasized the common struggle of the different nationalities against the class enemy while the second, which eventually triumphed in 1991, placed the accent on the ethno-nationalist agenda (Aregawi 2008: 373). Eventually, the second group also came to realize the need for a broader pan-Ethiopian framework if it were to realize its objective of seizing and maintaining power at the centre. Hence the creation of the broad coalition of forces known as the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1989.

But, initially, that coalition was composed of only two groups, of which only one of them (TPLF) was ethno-nationalist in composition,

while the other (the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement – EPDM) was a break-away faction of the multi-ethnic EPRP. Even EPRDF's subsequent broadening to include two other groups was problematic. The claim of the Oromo People's Democratic Organization to represent the Oromo was seriously contested by the older and initially stronger OLF. The fourth member, the Ethiopian Democratic Officers' Revolutionary Movement, was an *ad hoc* concoction set up to embrace the many captured Darg officers and was disbanded soon after victory. In 1994, EPDM was transformed into an ethno-nationalist organization, the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), with the 'Amhara' ethnic tag replacing the all-embracing 'Ethiopian'. Already in 1992, what in effect was a coalition within a coalition – the South Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Front (SEPDF) – had been set up for the southern peoples of Ethiopia as an umbrella organization for sixteen ethno-nationalist organizations. In 2003, in a process that reversed the transformation of the multi-ethnic EPDM into the ethnic ANDM about a decade earlier, SEPDF, which had started as a coalition of ethnic-based organizations, was changed into a multi-ethnic organization known as the South Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement.

It has remained one of the ironies of history that the uncompromising championing of the principle of self-determination (up to and including secession) has come from a group originating from the historical core of the Ethiopian polity. That it stuck to the principle during the armed struggle is understandable in view of its tested mobilizational value. What has been found to be more enigmatic has been its continued adherence to the principle even after its conquest of power, particularly in view of the fact that it represents a minority and thus stands to lose from any proper application of the principle.

It is not only in its composition – the tension between the ethnic and the multi-ethnic – that EPRDF was to carry with it the unresolved problems of the national question as conceptualized by the student movement. The ambiguity that surrounded the concepts of 'nation', 'nationality' and 'people' in the student debates of the 1970s has also endured. The argument of the proponents in the student movement of the principle of self-determination up to and including secession had hinged on the presence in Ethiopia of 'nationalities fast developing into nations'. The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia bestowed the right of secession to 'Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia' but did not bother to identify which was which. This ambiguity attained its climax in the formal designation of the Southern Region – the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region. This was formed through the merger of the five autonomous ethno-linguistic regions that had been set up pursuant to the 1991 Transitional Charter. To this day, it remains a moot point as to which of the region's diverse ethnic groups qualify to be called 'nation' and which of them have to be content with the designations of 'nationality' or 'people', categories presumably earmarked for a descending order of less-developed social

formations. Even more significantly, the issue of who is entitled to raise the banner of self-determination on behalf of an aggrieved 'nation', 'nationality' or 'people' has been quite problematic. Ideally, the issue of self-determination should have been resolved by an internationally monitored referendum. In practice, any organized group that rose in arms and called itself a 'liberation front' has arrogated to itself that entitlement. This has not only perpetuated the cult of violence that was prominent in the final years of the student movement but it has also meant that a vocal and well-organized minority has been acting on behalf of and in the name of the silent majority. That entitlement has brought a small elite not only political power but also economic privilege.²

Ironically, TPLF's acceptance of the EPLF thesis of a colonial question has not resolved the long-standing issue of Eritrea's relations with Ethiopia. True, at the outset, it brought about a marriage of convenience between the two fronts that accelerated the downfall of the Darg regime in 1991. The recent memoirs of estranged former TPLF members and even the reminiscences of not so estranged ones appear to suggest that TPLF was sometimes more pro-EPLF than the EPLF itself!³ After military victory, EPRDF not only facilitated but also celebrated Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia. The camaraderie was short-lived, however. A border dispute provided the pretext for a war as bloody as, if not bloodier than, that waged in the thirty years prior to independence. Just as the war sapped the resources of both states, the stalemate that followed has had a destabilizing effect on the region as a whole. Nor has EPRDF been particularly accommodative of armed struggles for independence waged by liberation fronts other than the EPLF. Just as the Bolshevik recognition of the right of secession ended with the independence of Finland in 1917, EPRDF's recognition of that right also seems to have ended with the independence of Eritrea (*de facto* in 1991 and *de jure* in 1993).⁴ EPRDF has continued to have troubled relations with particularly two liberation fronts, the OLF and the Ogaden National Liberation Front, which have claimed to represent two major ethnic groups, the Oromo and Somali, respectively. With the official designation of the two organizations as 'terrorist' in 2011, things seem to have reached a point of no return.

The second fateful legacy of the student movement – after the national question – lies in the sphere of political organization and its attendant culture. As we have seen in the preceding chapter, student organizations evolved in an ever-ascending scale from student councils to leftist political organizations. But the process was far from smooth;

² There has been a steadily growing literature on the problematic of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia. See, among others: Vaughan 2003; Merera 2003; International Crisis Group 2009; Markakis 2011; Aalen 2011.

³ The memoirs of Asgede Gebre Selassie (1999 EC), corroborated by Asrat Abraham (2003 EC), and interviews by Ato Sebat Negga on anniversaries of the founding of TPLF.

⁴ This should not be construed as an argument for more secessions; it is merely put forward to show the many bizarre twists of the logic of recognition of the right to secession.

it was characterized by considerable acrimony, fateful divisions, and mutual recriminations. The creation of USUAA in 1966 was perhaps the first most important development in this process. It marked not only a higher form of organization that posed a more serious challenge to the regime but also signalled the ascendancy of the Left in student politics. While USUAA appeared to have had at the outset the support of the majority of the students, however slim, a determined bid to overturn the initial decision and restore the campus unions was quashed by resort to intimidation and violence. That was the first intimation of a culture of intolerance that was to be the hallmark of the student movement and the Left that grew out of it.

But, it was in the external wing of the student movement that some of the lethal organizational divisions were to manifest themselves. This occurred first in 1971, when ESUNA was split into two. The walkout of the Sennay Lekke group from the 19th Congress, even if understandable in light of the acrimonious exchanges that preceded it, was a fateful step. It signalled the failure of dialogue to resolve political differences. Some two years later, what apparently started as an initiative to reinvigorate the moribund world-wide union of students ended up in dividing ESUE. Both divisions, particularly the latter, opened a chapter of the most acerbic exchanges that any student movement has ever seen. From then on, there was to be no give and take, no attempt at compromise. It was the beginning of what has come to be known as the culture of 'zero-sum game', of 'winner takes all'. What made the ESUE division around the formation of the World Wide Federation of Ethiopian Students (WWFES) even more lethal was that it concealed the jostling for hegemony of the two clandestine leftist political organizations, *Ma'ison* and EPRP. Subsequent ESUE and WWFES gatherings were to become battlegrounds for the divergent viewpoints of the rival organizations on a host of issues ranging from the nature of the student movement to the characterization of the 1974 revolution. Ironically, the eruption of the revolution for which both parties had struggled for so many years marked at the same time the moment of their irreparable fission. The 14th ESUE Congress of August 1974 has gone down in history as the last congress that the two parties attended together.

Had these divisions been confined to the student and leftist movement outside the country, they might have remained the senseless bickering of exiles, with little impact on the domestic scene. Unfortunately for the Left and for the country at large, they were transposed onto the home territory after 1975, impacting negatively on the revolutionary struggle, resulting in the death of thousands of young Ethiopians, and culminating in the mutual destruction of both parties and the ascendancy of the ethno-nationalist opposition. Both parties had their share of responsibility for that fateful outcome. *Ma'ison's* strategy of allying with the Darg was probably the greatest strategic mistake it has made in its history. It certainly proved costly both to itself and to the revolution. That strategy might well have arisen

from both the uncompromising opposition of the EPRP and *Ma'ison's* own relative organizational weakness, more particularly its failure to penetrate the youth and working class to the same degree as EPRP had done. But the belief that it could temporarily ally with the Darg to strengthen itself and then shunt it aside to emerge as the dominant force proved singularly naïve. As it turned out, another pro-Darg party founded by a former student leader also suffered the same fate. This was the *Wazlig*, set up by Sennay Lekke after his return from the USA following his walkout from ESUNA. By 1978, both *Ma'ison* and *Wazlig* had been purged from the coalition of pro-Darg parties (*Imaledeh*, as it was known by its Amharic acronym), setting the stage for the evolution of the Darg's own party, *Saddad*, into the one and only Workers Party of Ethiopia.

As for EPRP, while its opposition to the Darg was justified, the stridency with which it pursued it and the intransigence it showed towards the pro-Darg leftist parties could be said to have contributed to the final grim outcome. The prominence that the high school students had come to assume in the student movement in the 1970s translated itself after the revolution into a powerful anti-Darg and mostly pro-EPRP youth movement. EPRP cashed in on this reservoir of revolutionary zeal to establish its powerful youth wing, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Youth League (EPRYL). Until its leadership was decimated in the course of the Red Terror, EPRYL proved to be probably the most important contingent of the EPRP offensive against the Darg and its leftist allies.⁵ Partly inspired by the urban guerrillas of Latin America (such as the Tupamaros of Uruguay) and partly forced into it by the increasingly repressive policies of the Darg itself, EPRP resorted to a policy of urban insurrection, characterized mainly by the assassination of pro-Darg leftists and neighbourhood association (*qabale*) officials. This policy eventually proved counter-productive, however. On the one hand, it drove the Darg to even greater repression, including the launch of the notorious Red Terror, leading to the eventual decimation of all

⁵ For a fascinating and honest account of the formation and activities of the youth league, see Hiwot Teffera's *Tower in the Sky* (2013). After a hiatus following the publication of Kiflu Tadesse's history of EPRP in the 1990s, there has been a spate of memoirs and reminiscences by former EPRP/EPRA activists. These have ranged from the semi-fictional to the documentary. Hiwot's memoirs have been preceded by the gripping Amharic novel, *Merkognaw*, by Konjit Berhanu (2002 EC). The years 2010–11 have seen the publication of three more books on the subject. Of these, the book by Asmamaw Haylu (2003 EC), based as it is on the testimonies of active participants in the armed struggle as well as party documents, is to my knowledge the first detailed history of EPRA. It could profitably be read with the memoirs of one who was driven into the arms of the EPRA as he fled to avoid the Red Terror and has come out with a detailed description of daily life at the guerrilla base: Makonnen Araya (2010). The latest in the series are the memoirs of Ayalew Yimam (2011). His account, which also spans the author's involvement in the student movement and the ELF, is more problematic, based as it appears to be entirely on his remarkable but not always reliable memory, including a liberal dosage of dialogue whose veracity is questionable. He nonetheless gives us a rare and graphic description of the EPRA prison at Sengede based on his own experience as a prisoner, as well as the grim finale to the collapse of Asimba: the execution of about a dozen fighters who had been detained as *anja* (deviating faction). Unfortunately, this flood of memoirs from the EPRP side, some of it self-critical, has not been matched by similar reminiscences from the *Ma'ison* side.

leftist forces. Secondly, divergence within the EPRP leadership over the strategy of urban guerrilla warfare led to a split within the organization. This also accelerated the collapse of EPRP's urban struggle as some members of one faction (dubbed *anja*)⁶ sought refuge with the Darg and exposed the structure of the organization, leading to the massive arrest, torture and liquidation of EPRP members.

Nor was EPRP's rural armed struggle so successful. The death in 1973 of two of its pioneer fighters, Benyam Adane and Mohammed Mahfuz, in the arid lowlands of Eritrea while en route to the designated guerrilla base was a sign of the difficult days ahead. The core group sent to launch the armed struggle in northwestern Tigray remained hostage to the EPLF for over a year. After it was allowed to depart and start its armed struggle from the mountain base of Asimba, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Army (EPRA), as the armed wing of EPRP was called, continued to face enormous difficulties. The defection of a group of its fighters to the Darg in 1975 was the first blow to the organization. The leader of the defecting group, Tesfaye Mekonnen, adduced as cause for the defection the revolutionary measures being taken by the Darg, such as the rural land nationalization proclamation, and disagreements with the EPRA leader, Berhane Meskel Redda (Tesfaye 1985 EC: 143–4). The group went on to form *Malerid* (Marxist-Leninist Revolutionary Organization), one of the pro-Darg leftist parties that joined others of its ilk to form *Imaledeh*. In July 1976, EPRA suffered another blow when a detachment that had been sent to Wollo with a view to broadening the armed struggle was surrounded by peasants, who killed a number of the fighters and took the others prisoner. The captured fighters became the first victims of the Darg's retaliatory executions soon after the armed clash with EPRP began in the autumn of 1976 (Asmamaw 2003 EC). Ultimately, the Asimba base served more as a refuge for the many EPRP members who were fleeing from the Darg's terror in the towns, particularly the capital, than as a launching pad for any spectacular military operations. Even that refuge became impossible when, after a series of clashes with the TPLF forces, EPRA was forced to abandon it and move to the Gondar region, where it barely managed to survive for a few more years. The initiative in the armed struggle against the Darg had clearly passed to the ethno-nationalist force that, allied with EPLF, was to topple it in 1991.

Summing up, viewed within the given global and national context, the rise of the Ethiopian student movement had an element of inevitability about it. In the absence of any organized political opposition to a regime that was not prepared to introduce much-needed political and economic reform, students rose to the challenge. Many sacrificed their careers and their lives in the quest for what eventually turned out to be a utopian dream. The country's political culture, which made the movement inevitable, also conditioned their behaviour. Dogmatic

⁶ The faction was also known as *Ha-na La* ('A and B'), letter codes given to the two leaders of the dissenting group, Berhane Meskel Redda and Getachew Maru.

belief, rather than seasoned debate and a spirit of compromise, became the norm. This liability became particularly manifest in the students' framing of the national question and in their organizational culture. The legacy the movement has left behind in these two spheres has been the most problematic. The country has to come to grips with and move beyond this legacy if it is to have any hope of redemption. At the same time, however, we have to understand that the students did what they did in all genuineness and sincerity. They had no hidden agenda. They were driven by what has driven youth everywhere and throughout the ages – the quest for social justice and equitable development.

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III. ORAL SOURCES

In addition to the written sources enumerated above, this work is based on a corpus of oral data gathered from interviews and reminiscences. The most important component in this category of sources are the collective

reminiscences of some two dozen former activists of the student movement gathered in the course of a four-day retreat in Adama that I had organized in September 2005. The Amharic transcript of these recordings is deposited at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies Library at AAU and is referred here as OR (Oral Report). An English synopsis was published in 2010 under the title of *Documenting the Ethiopian Student Movement: An Exercise in Oral History* (referred to as Bahru 2010 here); a list of the participants is annexed to it.

In addition, in the years 2005–2012, I have interviewed the following persons involved in the student movement in one capacity or another:

Abdissa Ayana
Abebech Bekele
Amanuel Gebre Yesus
Eyasu Alemayehu
Elehu Feleke
Gezahagn Endale
Getachew Wakjira (Col.)
Tesfatsion Medhanie
Yilma Haile Michael

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Bahru Zewde is Emeritus Professor of History at Addis Ababa University and Vice President of the Ethiopian Academy of Sciences. He has authored many books and articles, notably *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1991* and *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia: The Reformist Intellectuals of the Early Twentieth Century*.

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